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Tomorrow's Dead

Thriller

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Sample translation by Alexandra Roesch

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NIHAL

Nihal has been running for less than twenty minutes before something stops her again. The air is still clean, practically begging to be inhaled, to rinse her out. And every time it happens it's like hitting an actual wall. Like someone's cinched her lungs up in a double zip tie.

A minute ago she was on the riverside path through Schlosspark. First two squirrels tore up a tree for no reason other than joy, then suddenly a crane was standing on the bank, shredding the morning light as it slowly spread its wings.

Or a heron. Nihal knows one flies with its neck straight and the other folds it into an S, but she can never remember which is which. Also it wasn't flying. So, whatever. A June morning so perfect it looks photoshopped, everything starting up, sheer bliss. And she's under *Caprivi* Bridge, bent double and gasping.

'Do you need help?'

The man asking is three times Nihal's age and a hundred times more fragile. Even his dog looks like it has smoker's lungs. Another thing Nihal can't tell apart: dog breeds. What is it, a basset hound, a griffon? Smoker's lungs, though, Ata would know. Her father would also know whether the bird in the park was a crane or a heron or a bloody sea eagle. Not much use to him now, all that knowing. When you're dying, dog breeds pretty quickly become less important.

Nihal waves him away and drags herself into the morning light, onto a strip of grass that's offensively green. Ahead of her is a wall so layered with graffiti it ought to have formed a crust by now. She's burning from the inside, soles, fingers. She kicks off her shoes, then her socks, feels the cool grass under her feet, and presses her palms against the shaded concrete. SFK screams back at her. Three letters, big as a double bed. As if volume could create meaning. Nihal tries to breathe evenly. Her heart has hiccups. It's disgusting. Focus on breathing. NCB. She doesn't even know that. No-claims bonus?

Her left arm starts twitching. Great, she thinks, muscle spasms now. But it's only her phone, in a sleeve strapped around her upper arm. She knows who it is without looking.

'Hi, Mum.'

Even the pause before her mother answers is packed with unspoken expectations. Some days Nihal can take it. Today isn't one of them.

'Any news?' she asks, before her mother can haul out the ton-weight *my child* she normally starts their calls with.

Silence again. Three, two, one...

'Your father...'

Sənin atan. She says it in Azerbaijani. That's how it's always been, as long as Nihal can remember. Her mother speaks Azerbaijani, Nihal answers in German. Every conversation is arm-wrestling.

‘What about him?’

Nihal pulls her shoes back on. She tucks the socks into the waistband of her running leggings.

‘He’s not doing well.’

She climbs the steps up to the bridge one by one. Her heart is still doing things a heart absolutely shouldn’t do. Compared to this, a knife stuck in your thigh is a joke. That’s concrete, you can pull it out, and you know exactly what to do. Stop the bleeding. Apply pressure. It doesn’t get simpler.

‘He’s dying, Mum.’

‘You mustn’t say that.’

‘It doesn’t matter whether I say it or not. You can pretend it isn’t true, but it won’t change anything. That’s why he came home, so you can care for him. Until he dies.’

‘I wanted him to come home.’

Of course, Nihal thinks. If someone gives you the chance to turn yourself into a martyr, you don’t need asking twice.

‘Is that it?’ she says. ‘Ata’s not well? Because we had this conversation yesterday and the day before.’

She stands on the bridge with the morning light in her face, as if the sun is aiming for her on purpose. Turning right takes her back. Left takes her across to the Österreichpark. The place where yesterday they found a body they still haven’t even managed to identify.

Nihal goes left.

‘Don’t you want to visit him?’

Breathing. Focus on breathing. ‘When are you going to get it? He doesn’t want me to visit.’

‘He only says that. Really he...’

‘...I’m his daughter, Mum. Not his mother. What he really wants or doesn’t want isn’t my problem.’

Why anyone thought the strip of green between *Sömmeringhalle* and *Caprivi Bridge* should be called the *Österreichpark* is a mystery. Why Austria? And why *park*? Even ‘green space’ is generous.

It’s basically a stretch of gravel just about big enough for a soccer cage. In the middle, on an island of bark mulch, they’ve planted a Styrian ornamental apple tree, propped up by a three-legged support. There are flowers too, red and white. Probably because Austria has ‘adopted’ the place. Nihal wouldn’t know any of this if she hadn’t googled it last night, neither that the stick in the middle is a Styrian ornamental apple tree, nor that a country can sponsor a patch of municipal nothing.

The gravel is bordered by bushes, and behind them the embankment drops down to the river path. At the back, away from the road, a few carefully chosen boulders have been stacked together. Nihal assumes that’s the ‘alpine rock garden’ she read about online. She can see it now: two men from the Austrian embassy, two from the parks department, two from the district council. In the middle a landscape architect with an outstretched arm, projecting a vision into the rubble.

‘And here,’ he says, ‘an alpine rock garden will take shape.’

Nobody has the faintest idea what that means. Everyone nods.

Yesterday, between these boulders shipped in from Austria for the occasion, a local woman’s dog found the dead man. Male, not yet thirty, a gunshot straight through the centre of his forehead. An execution. Forensics say he wasn’t killed elsewhere and dumped here. He was shot right here. Muzzle to forehead, finger on the trigger. In through the front, out through the back, and in the thousandth of a second in between, a life erased. No papers, no keys, no phone. Time of death sometime between one and three in the morning.

In the photos Nihal stared at last night until she felt sick, his show-off beard made him look eighteen, twenty at most. *Schifferkrause*. That's the name for the style of his beard. Nihal googled that too. A claim to individuality. And now he's absolutely dead.

New Air Jordans. A Hugo Boss hoodie. A pilot's watch by Maurice Lacroix, and by now Nihal knows it's genuine. RRP: €3,100. On his narrow wrist it looked even narrower. Someone who liked making a big show of himself, literally. The joggers were Boss as well. About as suitable for running as a mechanic's overalls. The only other thing Nihal knows about him is this: he definitely didn't box. Not with wrists like that.

[...]

SAAD

Leila and Saad sit side by side on one of the beer benches set out in front of the café called 'Bus Stop'. In the passage through to Adenauerallee, three police officers are patting down a Black man for drugs. Konrad Adenauer. First chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany from 1949 until... good question. Some time in the sixties, Saad thinks. A long time, anyway. Germans love continuity. Adenauer, Kohl, Merkel. TV shows like *3 nach 9. Wetten, dass...? Tatort*. It calms them down. Makes them feel like everything stays the same.

The glass roof above them is shaped like a sail. Makes sense.

They are in Hamburg, after all.

As the sun lifts above the treetops, a gust of wind skims under the benches. A McDonald's wrapper slides past them as if it's in a rush to get to Platform 8. Leila is chewing her second chocolate croissant and swinging her legs. In fact, everything about her is in motion.

When she looks up at Saad she grins with her mouth full, rolls her eyes, and holds up the half-chewed croissant to show him.

In the bay in front of them a white double-decker coach is parked with the luggage hatches open. People stub out cigarettes, heave suitcases into the hold, and climb on. The columns holding up the glass sail cast long shadows. One stretches right across their table. Leila plays with it; she dips her fingers into the shadow then lets them crawl back into the sun, feeling the warmth.

‘Is that ours?’ she asks.

It’s the third time she’s asked. The second chocolate pastry was a bad idea. Waiting is an insult to Leila at the best of times. She takes it personally. Sugar doesn’t help.

Saad points at the electronic departure board. ‘Can you read that?’

A few weeks ago Leila developed a sudden fascination with letters.

‘Co-pen...’ She waves it off. Takes too long.

‘Copenhagen,’ Saad says.

‘So no.’

‘So no.’

‘Pfff.’

At the next table, a man sits beside the biggest wheeled suitcase money can buy and stubs out his second cigarette. Saad has had the feeling for a while that the man has something on his mind, something he needs to express. When Saad looks up, their eyes meet.

‘Where are you travelling to?’ the man asks, across the tables.

Before Saad can answer, Leila shouts, ‘Berlin!’ She claps her hands. ‘We’re going home!’

The metal frame of their beer table is bent. Every time Leila kicks it with her foot, Saad’s coffee ripples in its paper cup.

‘Me too,’ the man says.

Leila stuffs the rest of her croissant into her mouth. ‘You’re going to Berlin too?’

‘No.’

He smiles at her, like he can’t help himself. That’s Leila’s secret superpower. No matter how bad your life feels in that moment, Leila touches the place in you that remembers not everything is awful.

‘Home,’ the man says.

‘And where’s that?’ Leila asks.

‘Damascus.’

And even as he keeps smiling at Leila, tears rise in his eyes in the space of a single wingbeat.

At the same time Saad’s spine stiffens. Damascus is the lie Leila’s life and his are built on. That they’re from Syria, that Leila’s mother died when Leila was still a baby, and that they came to Berlin as refugees.

Saad senses Leila thinking. She’s a second away from telling the man that she and Saad are also from Damascus, only she can’t remember it because she was too little back then.

But before she can, the man wipes the tear from his cheek and says, ‘Thirteen years.’ He lifts his hands, as if in prayer. ‘For thirteen years, every time I said *home*, I meant Damascus. Yesterday I wrote to my brothers.’ As if to prove it, he holds up his phone. ‘I wrote, I’m coming to Damascus. Then I looked at what I’d written. I thought, are you making the same mistake again? And then I realised, no, man, it’s not a mistake. You really are flying to Damascus. *Ya Allah*. This morning when I woke up I prayed, please don’t let it have been a dream. But it wasn’t a dream, man.’

Out of the corner of his eye, Saad sees a green coach pull in at Bay 3. He points at the departure board.

‘Read that.’

‘Be...’ Leila starts, and two letters are enough. ‘Berliiiiin! That’s our bus!’

As if rehearsed, the man and Saad stand at the same time. Leila already has her rucksack on, and her skateboard is twitching under her foot. The man and Saad walk towards each other, strangers who will never meet again, whose paths cross for five minutes then split for good.

And then they hug.

Leila raises her eyebrows.

‘Al-ḥamdu lillah,’ the man whispers into Saad’s shoulder.

‘Al-ḥamdu lillah,’ Saad says back.

‘Who was that?’ Leila asks.

They’re on the back seats. The same way they came to Hamburg, they leave again, FlixBus, back seats. Except Nihal was with them when they left Berlin. The engine gurgles under their seats. The coach eases backwards out from under the glass roof. The beer bench they were sitting on is already occupied by a couple kissing. The Syrian man and his suitcase are nowhere to be seen.

‘Just someone who’s had a hard time,’ Saad says.

The bus shudders. The driver drops it into gear. They roll towards Adenauerallee. Saad remembers when he first learned the phrase *to have a hard time*. He liked the metaphor.

Now it’s Leila chewing on it, turning the meaning over in her mouth.

Saad thinks about what’s waiting for them. Berlin. Nihal. You can’t think of one without the other. They’ll be in the same city again. She still doesn’t know. For reasons Saad can’t quite understand, he hasn’t told her.

They had their time. Here in Hamburg. They had each other. But *having each other* has two sides. One side is that you’re never alone, even when the other person isn’t there. The other

side is the one that chokes the breath out of you, because the other person is always there, even when they aren't.

Saad could have lived with that.

Nihal couldn't.