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WOLF HAAS BRENNER AND GOD

TRANSLATED BY ANNIE JANUSCH



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MELVILLE
INTERNATIONAL
CRIME

BRENNER AND GOD

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My grandmother always used to say to me, *when you die, they're gonna give that mouth of yours its own funeral*. So you see, a person can change. Because today I am the epitome of silence. And it'd take something out of the ordinary to get me started. The days when everything used to set me off are over. Listen, why should every bloodbath wind up in my pint of beer? Like I've been saying for some time now, it's up to the boys to take care of. My motto, as it were,

Personally, I prefer to look on the positive side of life these days. Not just Murder H. Wrote all the time, and who-got-who with a bullet, a knife, an extension cord, or what a else I don't know. Me, I'm far more interested in the nice people now, the quiet ones, the normals, the ones who you'd say—they lead their regular lives, abide by the law, don't mistake themselves for the good lord when they get up in the morning, just nice tidy lives. Propriety and all.

Look at Kressdorf's chauffeur, for example. Kressdorf, Lion of Construction, surely you know his trucks with the green letters KREBA, short for *Kressdorf Bau*. They've done a lot of work in Munich, you may have seen it, here, here, and there. And then there's this MegaLan we're getting now. But this isn't about Kressdorf, it's about his chauffeur. Because naturally a man like Kressdorf has got a chauffeur; he can't drive himself everywhere, not a chance. Certainly not since he got married—the young bride in Vienna, the KREBA headquarters in Munich, and now a two-year-old child—simplest for them all to meet in the middle, say, in Kitzbühel. Because in Kitzbühel, of course, you've got the businesses, the contacts, you got the idea. For a child this can't be good either, back and forth all the time, and I reckon Kressdorf's daughter already thinks the autobahn is her nursery. But I have to admit she's a nice kid. Not like kids today usually are—no please, no thank you, no hello, no good-by. Then again, it's a good thing they do behave like that, because at least that way you can tell them apart from the adults. It used to be more by size that you could tell—a small one was a child and a big one was an adult. But today the kids grow so fast that you can't use size as a point of reference anymore—is that the chief physician striding out of the maternity ward, or is it the newborn itself? And even then it's the exact opposite of how it used to be—rule of thumb, the less arrogant one's the physician.

So I was just saying, the maternity ward. Kressdorf's wife was a doctor who had her own practice, a small clinic in an office suite right downtown. A good doctor, but unfortunately a lot of problems lately with the churchgoers in front of the building, by which I mean the demonstrators. They were against abortion because that was just their conviction, it shouldn't exist, a thousand reasons, the good lord, the virgin Mary and, and, *and*.

It's lucky the driver was such a robust man, because there were some days when a lankier driver would've been a lost cause. He had to smuggle the doctor's baby past those rosary-slinging rowdies like a stadium security guard who narrowly saves the referee from the lynching mob.

Now, the father's under a great deal of stress because with contractors there's always stress, and so of course the kid's got stress, too. Because today when you have two parents who don't have any time, but who do have three hundred miles of autobahn between them

then as their child, you can never escape the autobahn completely. And so you can't be angry with the child if she appoints her driver as her guardian. Believe it or not, the Kressdorf kid's first word—not "Mama," not "Papa"—"Driver." But that was at least six months ago because in the meantime, little Helena has already started chattering so much from her car seat that the driver barely has use for the radio anymore. And above all she's good at understanding Herr Simon's had the feeling that this child understands him better than most adults he's had anything to do with in his life. He can tell Helena the most difficult things, problems, all of it, and that two-year-old girl in the backseat understands. In return, she gives him a full report on every detail down to the hair, when he picks her up from her nanny, and Herr Simon, always the attentive listener. There was simply a kindred connection between them. Like-minded souls: understatement.

Overall, Herr Simon was quite content with his new life, which is a way of saying, he hadn't always been a chauffeur. He'd tried out different professions—more than fifty, in fact—before he found his thing. Whereas others his age were already thinking about retirement and pensions, Herr Simon was only just beginning a regular professional life. First, the five hours from Vienna to Munich, then back five hours from Munich to Vienna, sometimes with the mother in tow, rarely with the father, but always with the amiable kid who understood him so well. Unless you were born to be a chauffeur, you can hardly imagine how much suited him. And one thing you can't forget: Kressdorf didn't pay badly. Plagued by a guilty conscience over his child, he compensated the chauffeur exceedingly well. Or maybe it wasn't so much a guilty conscience as it was basic concern for the kid. There was never a riotous crowd in front of the abortion clinic, but somehow that silent threat from the church-type was even more menacing, because there's nothing worse than a sighing aggressor. A well-known fact: behind every mass murderer there's a mass sigher.

The Frau Doctor was thrilled about her dependable driver. That he took his job seriously goes without saying. If there was even the slightest noise somewhere, a squeal from the air conditioning, or a faint streak left by the windshield wiper, or if a floor mat wasn't placed just so—it would have been unthinkable for him to subject the child to such a thing. Sure, he could've just said, Helena can't see the floor mat from her car seat anyway, but no, as a matter of principle, everything was always *picobello*, meticulous.

So, the chauffeur gets annoyed at himself for having forgotten to gas up yesterday just because it's never happened to him before. Five minutes into the drive out of Vienna, he glances at the gas gauge, and believe it or not, he didn't gas up last night, i.e., nothing but vapors to coast on for 190 kilometers!

Then again, maybe this was on account of the pills. Because not all the effects were positive. A certain absentmindedness. *It's possible the pills caused this*, the chauffeur thought while keeping an eye out for the next gas station. He actually gave a great deal of thought to the effects of the pills. On the one hand, he wasn't sleeping so well anymore, but on the other, he was doing better since they'd been prescribed to him—where you find yourself saying, *the sun is shining a little brighter for me today*. You should know, there wasn't much wrong with him before, especially since he'd left his last girlfriend. Although in the woman's defense I should add—and, frankly, I think she left him—that she'd been at her wits' end with him. And it was his girlfriend who'd managed to get him to even go to the doctor, because in his life Herr Simon had been a crank about doctors.

But then he didn't take the pills, naysaying not only doctors but drugs, too. And just when his girlfriend had left for good, and one day the refrigerator was completely empty, the kitchen cabinets bare, canned goods and so on, pasta, rice, every last bit, so only the pills were left—only then did he take the pills. And since then—like a new man! More positive. You might have noticed it earlier today, for example, when once again the pro-life soldiers of prayer had formed a standing guard in front of the clinic. And he'd barely been able to get past them with little Helena because they were pushing from the right and the left, rosaries and embryo photos shoved right under his nose like in holy Sicily. Now, before, this would've guaranteed his hand flying out, and those plastic embryos and rosary beads would've gone scattering. But because of the pills, much calmer. And with composure you get a lot farther.

He was already twisting things around in his head at the gas station, telling himself that a minor mistake like this can happen to anyone once. And anyway, for a two-year-old even the goings-on at a gas station are interesting. She can look out the window, there are people to watch, hoses, nozzles, disposable gloves, everything. Plus, one thing you can't forget—those tizzying numbers, nothing's more beautiful to a child's soul.

So he slips out of the car as quickly as possible and closes the door behind him—you would've thought he was about to hold up the gas station—because he wants to prevent any fumes from wafting in to Helena. Because those noxious fumes, well, a little's a lot for a child. Well, I don't want to say absolutely harmful, but good, certainly not. *On second thought*, the driver says to himself—and here maybe the pills were already at work a little—*maybe a healthy child should be able to withstand a few fumes*.

While he gassed up, he made faces at Helena through the window. But to no effect; she just stared placidly back at him. And the chauffeur thought, *you see, Helena knows that at heart I'm not one to mug around*, so he assumed a normal expression, and get a load of this: then Helena smiled. You see what kind of understanding the two of them have? No wonder, when they spend so many hours together on the autobahn. Then came the window washing, though. You wouldn't believe what kind of *Hello!* that was for Helena. The chauffeur actually got nervous that the alarm would go off, what with the child giggling and pedaling her legs in the car seat as the sponge ran over the windshield, and when he squeegeed the water off, she liked that even better. So the chauffeur declared to himself, *I will always gas up on the way if she likes so much*, and he even gave the clean passenger-side windows an extra wash, and the rear window, too, although by that point Helena wasn't getting so much out of it anymore since she couldn't turn around in her car seat.

Before he went into the shop to pay, he moved the car a few feet over to the side to where the air-pressure pump was and away from the fumes.

"I'll bring you a chocolate bar," he said as he got out of the car, because it was never *bal* *wanna bonbon?* or any of that other baby talk. Rather, the driver always insisted on correct German with Helena, out of principle. Chocolate wasn't entirely correct though, because the Frau Doctor had in fact impressed upon him, "No chocolate, Herr Simon. Absolutely no sugar!"

Herr Simon had explained to her a thousand times that they were just baby teeth, only there for the time being, a second pair would grow in anyway, well, not a pair, but a second crew, as it were, and when that happened, then you could always say, less chocolate. Or just don't bite all the way into it. The Frau Doctor always knew better, of course, even though

wasn't like she was a dentist, and in a private moment, the chauffeur sometimes thought to himself, *with those abortions of hers, just think how many teeth will never even find accommodations*. But arguments are useless, since she even went on to claim that chocolate was bad for the rash on Helena's hands. Otherwise, a downright nice woman. Nice intelligent, perky figure, she works. The chauffeur even envied Kressdorf a little, but it was no mean-spirited envy, no I'd almost like to call it a positive envy, and that, too, must've been attributable to the pills. Because he said to himself, *why would a woman like the Frodo Doctor seek someone like me when she can have someone like Kressdorf?* Maybe he would have thought that before, too. But before, that same thought would have railed against the wife first, the husband second, himself third, and fourth, the world at large. And today we're very much on the side of forgiveness, meaning, *Kressdorf: not such a bad guy*. Maybe the pills even exaggerated this positive perspective a bit, but one thing I should add: Kressdorf was always courteous with his chauffeur, never a crass word, never addressing him informally as *du*, but always respectfully as *Sie* and Herr Simon.

Otherwise, the KREBA chief had enemies, of course, more than enough. I don't want to sugarcoat anything now just because. But if it's about enemies, then it's his wife who's got him beat by a long shot. Because, a routine question, *do you have enemies?* As an abortion doctor you simply have a lot of people against you, it doesn't work any other way. Which is why the two of them were so happy that their daughter was in such good hands with the new chauffeur. Otherwise, they could have just hired a regular driver. But with him being a former police officer, they simply felt safer.

That they'd been so angry with him about a bar of chocolate of all things can be explained only in psychological terms. All told, his blunder with the chocolate never even would've been exposed if it hadn't been so plainly visible on the surveillance video. And when, as a parent, you look at something a hundred times, you play it a hundred times forward and backward, a hundred times over, you stop being able to see anything—except for a driver who can't make up his mind between the different kinds of chocolate bars at a gas station. And then, all of a sudden, you see the chocolate as being the culprit.

It was an especially strange morning because something happened at the clinic, too. It began when the first patient on the morning's scheduled surgeries turned out to be an old acquaintance. You're going to say a male patient in an abortion clinic is a rare thing, but that's not the case, because family planning's a complete package, and vasectomies are performed there, too. Perfectly routine at a clinic like this.

As a matter of principle, Frau Doctor Kressdorf had great sympathy for the men who came in for vasectomies. Because men tend to leave everything else up to women, the vasectomy candidates were practically minor saints to her. However, the way she saw it, as a woman and as the director of the clinic, she was content to let the urologist perform the procedure. An exception was today's candidate, who happened to have a thing for her. You should know Detective Peinhaupt used to know the Frau Doctor a little, back when he was starting out as a patrol officer and would always get assigned to the anti-abortionists making a racket out in front of the clinic. Since he joined the Criminal Investigation Bureau, or CRIB for short, the smaller scuffles didn't concern him anymore, and since the clinic started hiring its own private security guards, it had gotten a little quieter on the street anyway. The demonstrators had limited themselves to praying their rosaries and weren't accosting the patients anymore. You've got to picture this for yourself: to the right of the entrance is a rosary-praying anti-abortionist standing with a picture of an embryo, and to the left of the entrance—and even a bit as imposing—is a bull-necked female security guard with her hair buzzed like a mowed lawn. And there between those two holy columns, the patients would get shooed through. Back when Peinhaupt was on patrol, Sykora once said to him, “pro-life versus pro-dyke” because Sykora was always joking, and Peinhaupt had made a special note of this one, but when he tried telling it to Alpha II as if he'd just come up with it himself, he didn't even crack a smile. But, okay, Alpha II was the kind of guy who couldn't be coaxed out of his shell that easily. Maybe he would've loosened up more if on his last vacation he hadn't been struck by that lightning.

It proved to be just a temporary lull for the police, because the ruckus on the street once managed to move inside the building. Believe it or not, the pro-lifers bought up, one by one, the offices surrounding the clinic. Main question: where did they get so much money from? And since the pro-lifers were the majority of the building's tenants and tried every means of getting the clinic to terminate its lease, they racked up so many power outages that the police were right back in there for the long haul.

In theory, there wasn't much the police could do about the building's tenants, and Peinhaupt even joked to the Frau Doctor once that up against a guy like Knoll, only a hitman could help. See, Knoll was the head of the pro-lifers. And it was Knoll, too, who'd scraped together the money for the property. He certainly didn't earn it selling alarm systems to Sectec. He had the best connections, no question. Obviously the Frau Doctor hadn't hired a hitman, but she did go to the newspapers when Knoll mounted surveillance cameras in the building's lobby in order to intimidate her patients. And maybe there was a moment when she did regret not hiring a hitman, because the article broke on the same day that Knoll

served her with legal papers and in the same week that a water pipe broke. Peinhaupt got paid on it because the matter required the police, of course. And so it was, on this of assignments, that the brochure fell into Peinhaupt's hands. Like an advertisement that the didn't just practice abortion but prevention, too—in other words, sterilization. So he said to his colleagues on the force, *I'd never have that done*. Emasculation and all. But among men, of course, the conversation immediately got steered in the direction of *when in Rome, well then what an attractive doctor*.

In truth, Peinhaupt had entirely different reasons for a vasectomy—four, in fact, very good and very expensive reasons. Because one thing you can't forget: as a young investigator with only a few years of service behind him, he was just scraping by, netting two thousand euros and then the bonus pay on top of it, i.e., danger, weekends, nights. And an unplanned child would have him paying roughly 340 euros. That had Peinhaupt calculating everything all over again while he was lying there on the operating table, waiting for the procedure. Because you're going to have some doubts in a situation like this. Now, he didn't jump up and run, but he did calculate the approximate price of his four children. Because it varies, depending on the age.

First for little Sandra he paid 320 euros, to the hairstylist in the Salzgies district who always said she had an IUD when the detective came by on his beat, and then one day the IUD was called Sandra. And for Benjamin it was also 320, but only for one more year because he was already in kindergarten, and even though his mother was a kindergarten teacher, lowering the alimony didn't figure into the calculation, so it was the full 320 for little Benjamin. At the time, Peinhaupt had sworn *Benjamin and not another one after him*, magic of the name Benjamin, as it were. Then came the twins, 360 euros each, because of a group discount for twins, and so you come to exactly 340 euros times four, Peinhaupt calculated, as he slowly began to wonder why they'd left him waiting so long on the operating table. It's not exactly comfortable, either: first they get you to lie down—no one wants to lie there so exposed on the table—and then they disappear and leave you all alone. Please.

Four times 340 is 1,360, Peinhaupt calculated, which, subtracted from his net pay, left him with not even 700 euros. He would barely be getting by if it wasn't for the money he got paid under the table for serving court summonses. For the anesthesiologist's part, he could not take his time, because at 1,360, all doubt had been removed. He asked himself where the doctors had been this whole time. They finished prepping him for the procedure a few minutes ago, and then the light in the operating room went out. A minute later it came back on, but still no one had turned up. It occurred to him that he might have been lying under this harsh light for half an hour already waiting for the surgery, without a doctor anywhere in sight. *Is it possible they put me under already? Maybe I only dreamed that the lights went out briefly while they were prepping me, and the emergency generator started up*. Typical operative dream. You should know that Peinhaupt had declined the local anesthetic, and the Frau Doctor had said she suspected as much—fearful of even minor procedures, men tend to ask for general anesthesia. *It's not possible that the surgical team got scared off just because the power went out*, Peinhaupt thought, *it's all just a hysterical dream, and I'm already long under. And it's just my unconsciousness protesting against my most important body part's vitality getting snuffed out, hence the dream that the light went out*.

Suddenly Peinhaupt felt certain that everything must already be over. That he was just waking up in post-op, i.e., after a lucid nightmare. Because nothing else was possible, every other explanation was unthinkable. Peinhaupt could have been persuaded that it was the blade of the scalpel that was for holding and the handle for making the incision. The anesthesiologist must have really numbed him into a nightmare! *This just can't be real!* Peinhaupt decided.

Watch closely, Peinhaupt's lying there on the operating table nicely prepped like an inverted Adam, where the fig leaf is draped over his whole body except for where the fig leaf would cover Adam, when finally the door swings open, but it's not the anesthesiologist who opens the door, and it's not the urologist who comes in after him.

"Hey, Peinhaupt!"

And it wasn't even Frau Doctor Kressdorf who yelled out in shock, "Hey, Peinhaupt! Whether you believe it or not. His two ex-colleagues Sykora and Zand. Zand, Erich! And Sykora! His old patrol buddies, walking through the door, completely dumbfounded and gawking at the exposed patient on the operating table, and they don't even laugh. In fact Zand, Erich and Sykora seem petrified until Zand, Erich finally says, "Hey, Peinhaupt, what are you doing here?!"

In retrospect, those seemed like the good old days to Frau Doctor Kressdorf. Like a carefree paradise. When she was still capable of getting worked up over a power outage or a water pipe breaking. When she still believed that a flooded clinic was reason enough to call the police. Or when a couple of cameras in the lobby had her running straight to the newspaper. And when, even in the middle of the power outage, it still occurred to her to call her driver before he got to Kitzbühel so he could relay everything to her husband.

She couldn't have known that her driver wasn't even on the autobahn yet. Only hindsight did she realize that, at the exact time of the power outage, Herr Simon was standing in the gas station convenience mart and having a quick double espresso.

Two gas station drunks were hanging out there, too, but Herr Simon, only coffee. Because first of all, as a chauffeur, no alcohol, and second of all, it didn't agree with the pills. Interesting, though. Since he'd stopped drinking alcohol, coffee had become all the more important to *Herr Simon*. He never would have dreamed of being called that back when he was still on the police force. But Kressdorf and the Frau Doctor and everyone at the clinic referred to him that way, a service name, as it were.

Now don't go thinking that it bothered him, because: best job he'd had his whole life. Kressdorf's chauffeur, always meeting interesting people, you get the idea. Congressman Stachl, for example, who was just on the gas station's TV, on account of the morning news. Guaranteed that the gas station attendant and the two drunks didn't know him. The fatter of the two only laughed at the congressman's first name, because *Aurelius Stachl*, the fat drunk said, *a name like that's its own punishment*. But he definitely wouldn't have thought that Herr Simon might know Stachl personally. And not just know him, but know things about him. And he was overjoyed for Helena that her father had been given a chance with MegaLar because—college tuition, you can't start thinking too early about that, and you can't leave all up to the Frau Doctor either. And one thing you can't forget. The clinic still wasn't completely out of debt, on account of the investments and the expenditures—don't even ask.

Nothing on the docket now except getting Helena to Kitzbühel. A glorious, sunny morning it was, and with his heart beating all the better from the espresso, he took those few steps from the gas station to the car with real attitude, like you might say, *life: perfectly okay*. When you think about what he was like a year ago, you've really got to say, hats off to the pills.

But when he saw that the car was empty, the pills had a hard time with him, of course. The double espresso stepped right into the foreground now because as he walked from the gas station to the BMW and didn't see Helena's head through the rear window, his heart stood still a moment, and then started pounding like he'd gulped down not just a double espresso but the contents of the entire coffee machine.

Interesting, though. His heart wasn't beating where the heart's supposed to beat, but in his head. Because his jugular must have been thicker than the fuel hose he'd gassed up the BMW with—*unbelievable, what a car like this guzzles*, but he told himself, *why should it bother me, don't have to pay for it, and I'm too old for climate change*.

The blood was pumping so hard through his arteries and into his brain now that his entire

head was throbbing like the time he'd held his ear right up to the speaker at a Jimi Hendrix concert in Stuttgart, 1969. They fit seven people in an old Citroën on the drive from Leitner's house to Stuttgart and back—eight of them, considering Leitner's girlfriend was already pregnant by the drive home. But she told them all it wasn't Hendrix's, no, it was Helmut Kögelberger's.

The hammering in his head was so loud that he didn't even hear the truck thundering down the street. And I do believe, even to this day, that it saved his life. Because he only noticed the truck after it had driven past him, i.e., too late to throw himself in front of its wheels. And maybe, given how much blood was shooting into his head, maybe that much more of the pills reached his brain. Because suddenly there was a straw to grasp at again, a glimmer of hope again, a silver lining again, in other words—*maybe I'm deceiving myself. Just because I can't see Helena's head through the back window when I'm fifteen feet away doesn't mean that she's not in the car anymore.*

Maybe she fell asleep and is just a little slouched down in her car seat, and that's why I don't see her, Herr Simon told himself. Which was complete nonsense, of course, when he knew for a fact that he should be able to see the child from here. Nor can a child really slouch if she's buckled correctly into her car seat, and Herr Simon never drove three feet without buckling Helena in according to the letter of the law—that you can't fairly accuse him of.

But by the next step, direction BMW, the blood in his head was already floating that last straw out to sea. *Who knows, maybe it's just a reflection in the back window.* There are so many cars today with tinted windows you can't even see through. And now he really did see something, or so it seemed. Helena had turned herself around in her car seat and was staring at him, deathly pale and with panic-stricken eyes. But it was only the reflection of his own face and the panic in his own eyes that caused Herr Simon to barely recognize himself. No longer with conviction, another step and another step, but even from two steps away, still nothing of Helena to be seen. And as he stood directly beside the car, still nothing of Helena to be seen, not even through the side window. And when finally, with trembling fingers, he pressed the button on the car's key fob, it was of no use.

He kept pressing it, but the doors just unlocked and locked and unlocked and locked themselves, making that damned noise. Just once I'd like to understand how this remote keyless-system actually works, because technology: a world of magic. Herr Simon was less interested in these sorts of things, he'd never had much of a grasp of technology, he used to get criticized for that all the time on the police force. A certain interest had awoken in him more recently since he'd become a chauffeur, because he'd counted himself fortunate a few times now to be living in an age when there are things that nobody would have dreamed of before, for example, unlocking a car from a distance like a magician. But now he had to accept that there was nothing magical about the key he was holding in his hand, because he could press and he could wish all he wanted, he could lock and unlock a thousand times, and he'd still only produce this knocking sound, like a drummer in a funeral march, driving the tears from the eyes of the mourners at the grave site. But for all that, the little girl, who the Frau Doctor had placed in his care, didn't pop back up.

Interesting, though. He must have blacked out at this point—missing footage, if you will. Because later he had no memory of how he had run around the gas station. He didn't remember running through the car wash. He didn't remember stumbling out of the lot and

running up and down the street. He didn't remember running a second and then a third time around the gas station and through the car wash. Or better put, he did in fact remember it. But in reverse! Now how is something like this possible?

Watch closely. His forward-recollection kicked in only at the point when he ran back into the gas station. He doesn't mention a word about the child having disappeared, instead *something's been stolen from my car*. Because otherwise the gas station attendant is going to call the police right away if he says *what* has been stolen. The police gave Herr Ex-Detective hell for that one. *Why didn't you call the police immediately, close off the streets, crackdown on raids, the works!* And I do have to say, with something like this, you've simply got to call the police. Personal history with the police notwithstanding. Herr Simon made a big mistake there. Maybe the pills had him feeling a little too sure of himself. Even if afterward you can say ten times over, *it wouldn't have mattered anyway, there would've been no point in calling the police right away, because already far too late to close off the streets*. But he couldn't have known that. And at least he would have spared himself a little trouble. In hindsight. Above all he would have been spared those smartasses at the newspaper, because they managed to dig up from some channel or another his ancient police academy photo, and beneath it they put the caption: *BODYGUARD SIPS SLOW DRIP BEFORE CALLING COPS.*

Here I feel the need to add: that's not quite right, either! Because he only ordered his second cup of coffee in order to strike up a conversation with the gas station attendant now. Whether anything might have shown up on the surveillance monitors. The gas station attendant was very sociable, or really I should say cash register attendant, because attendants don't attend to the gas anymore these days, just the cash register. His name tag said *Milan* and the young man explained to his customer in flawless German that the fuel pumps were surveilled, entrance surveilled, cash register surveilled, but over by the air pump, where Herr Simon had of course moved the car, not surveilled. But I have to say, this makes no sense because an air pump can be stolen faster than a gas pump. But that's just how it was, and really, Herr Simon already knew as much, the first thing he'd done outside was look to see whether there was a camera in range.

"Can I maybe have a quick look anyway to see whether one of the other cameras picked up the thief getting away?"

"I'm afraid that's not allowed," Milan said and set his espresso down in front of him.

I don't know why, but—did he simply take a liking to Herr Simon, was he hoping for a good tip, did he have a guilty conscience that a theft had occurred on company property, or did Herr Simon just have a look of sheer desperation?—the attendant gestured for him to come behind the counter, and he showed him the flat monitor that hung above the cash register. Ten small cameras, if you can believe it: pump 1, pump 2, pump 3, pump 4, pump 5, pump 6, pump 7, pump 8, entrance, cash register.

Milan rewound the video and after just a few seconds you could see Herr Simon staggering backwards out of the shop, then running backwards around the gas station—you've got to picture this for yourself, you see yourself doing something that you just did five minutes ago but don't remember anymore—backwards into the car wash three times and backwards out of three times, the greatest distress of his life looking ridiculous backwards and lasting just a few foolish seconds until, backwards, Herr Simon froze into a pillar of salt, as though Milan had paused the image. And a moment later, an entirely different Herr Simon walked leisurely

backwards into the shop.

The attendant rewound the video to the place where Herr Simon was back at his car, smiling, dirtying the clean windows, and taking his time sucking the gasoline out of the tank.

From that point on he played the video normally, i.e., forward and at the regular speed. And finally the scenes where Herr Simon was hoping to be able to see something suspicious. First you see him hanging the fuel nozzle back up. Then he moves the car so that the Volvo behind him can pull up. The Volvo driver gasses up, Herr Simon goes into the shop to pay, the Volvo drives off again without a stolen child. Then a silver Alfa pulls up to another pump, but the driver only walks out of the shop with two cans of Red Bull and no Helena. And briefly you see the red-haired woman—who was standing in Herr Simon's way as he was trying to balance his double espresso on the counter—walk into the shop. The attendant knows her, though, because she lives right across the street and was only buying something from the shop like she does every day. Then an old white Golf pulls through just because it wants to turn around, such that the license plate can't be made out, but it doesn't matter because it didn't even come to a complete stop.

And then you see—forward this time and at the right speed—how Herr Simon comes back out of the shop and how he recoils as though the earth were opening up before him. It was almost worse for him to be experiencing this moment a second time now on-screen—should I say for the first time.

"I'm sorry," Milan said. "You can't see anything. Was it valuable?"

"What?"

"What got stolen from your car?"

Herr Simon gave no answer. These forgotten minutes were such a nightmare that, if the screen had revealed him to be the kidnapper himself, he wouldn't have been surprised.

"Should I call the police?"

"It's too late now. They're already over the mountains."

He felt so numb that he had no idea what he should do. The pills weren't helping him, the coffee wasn't helping him, and the panic wasn't helping him. Instead, complete power outage.

"Give me another espresso," he said to Milan.

Because he was like a little kid now who's gotten into some trouble and thinks that nobody will find out about it if he just closes his eyes or hides behind the house. That the newspaper criticized him so much for it, though, I don't think is right, either. Somehow he expected two-year-old Helena to come strolling in through the door, and off they'd drive together. And believe it or not, he even bought a medium-sized chocolate bar for her. He told himself a medium-sized bar without any filling is a compromise that all parties could live with, chocolate proponents and chocolate opponents alike.

He ignored his cell phone's ringing. Or what's called ringing. Jimi Hendrix played "Castles Made of Sand" because that was what the son of the clinic's psychologist had conjured up for him his first week on the job. For the first time in his life, Jimi annoyed him because he was playing the same thing over and over. Herr Simon didn't even look at who was calling because the risk was too great that it might be the Frau Doctor. You should know, when he was on the road she would often check in during an abortion break to make sure everything was okay, and Herr Simon always made a point of asking Helena something so that her man could hear her voice over the phone, and then she'd be pacified.

The two gas station drunks at the counter weren't bothered any by the unrelenting ringtones either. Sure, they glanced over a little, but otherwise, no commentary. Fortunately, the gas station TV drowned out the cell phone a bit, too, because a blond newscaster was saying empathetic things to people with problems, but her voice was so aggressive that it sounded like the plastic surgeon had mistakenly nailed her vocal cords to her ears on her last visit.

Interesting customers came in now and then, which also distracted nicely. Because they didn't just come in and pay, but would make the rounds, too, a bottle of water, chips and a sleeve of cookies, sausage on a bun, a newspaper, there was a lot to look at, and meanwhile his cell phone would go off, maybe twice per customer. Jimi sang again and again, but Herr Simon didn't pick up.

From the way the gas station customers ignored him, he realized that they simply took him for a gas station drunk himself. Because one thing you can't forget. Herr Simon looked like he'd just been to hell and back.

"Your phone's ringing," a customer said on her way out, on account of the way he was staring at her. But she couldn't have known that it was only because of the chocolate bar she'd bought. He ordered himself another espresso, and when Helena still didn't turn up, he left. Maybe she'd climbed back into the car, maybe she'd just gone on a little outing, and now she was back in her car seat again. Or another possibility. Maybe Herr Simon had just hallucinated the whole thing, possibly due to the pills? Because he did have a nonalcoholic beer yesterday, and even in nonalcoholic beer there's still a little bit of alcohol, which means if you drink thirty-six: drunken stupor. He'd only had one, but still, hope is hope. Or another possibility altogether: the kidnappers had changed their minds. They had returned the child, acting as if it had been nothing. Or, anti-abortionist Knoll had only wanted to make a slight threat, taking the child away briefly, like he'd threatened the Frau Doctor before, and then giving her right back—a rapping at the window, as it were.

Herr Simon retraced his steps exactly as he had taken them before, maybe out of a certain superstition that repeating the previous experience would make it un-happen. But when it comes to superstition, the good lord is merciless, he hates it like a CEO does a labor union. And still no Helena through the back window, still no Helena through the side window, still no Helena when he pressed the button on the key fob, and from the driver's seat, still no Helena in the rearview mirror. At that moment, as he looked in the rearview mirror, his cell phone went off again. It made Herr Simon so furious that he pounded his fist on the steering wheel. Because he imagined the ringtone scaring Helena away, as though if it weren't for Jimi Hendrix maybe she'd be sitting there in the rearview mirror. Jimi sang like he was mocking him.

Because of the fist-pounding and the third espresso, his heart was throwing another tantrum. But he forced himself to search the car. You're going to say, *where's she supposed to be, Helena, she's not hiding beneath the hood*. But you see how the shock was slowly driving him mad. The panic was enough to drive him crazy, and where the panic left off, the pills picked up and drove him even crazier. Because now he was clinging to the thought that children like to hide. That it's fun for kids, you get the idea. And even though the little girl wouldn't have been in a position to hide anywhere but her car seat, he searched the whole car. Maybe she was curled up comfortably behind the backseat, waiting for that dumb driver to finally find her. But no Helena behind the seats, no Helena under the seats, no Helena

the glove compartment, no Helena beneath the floor mats, not even a Helena in the trunk.

There was a moment when Herr Simon thought he might start crying. But it didn't come from within, not from his inner desperation, no, it came more from his face, from outside. And even then he didn't cry. Instead, whether you believe it or not: he sneezed five times in a row. By the fifth time he was already walking back through the gas station's automatic door and ordering himself another espresso. And then finally he called Kressdorf. The Frau Doctor was impossible, he'd rather die, because to tell a mother *I lost your child*. In a situation like that you fear the mightiest Lion of Construction less than you do the mother.

At first he just stared a while at Kressdorf's number and wondered, *should I or shouldn't I*. But then, finally, he dialed. And immediately hung up again before it even started ringing. And then, finally, he dialed and actually waited for it to ring, too.

Kressdorf always had to laugh when people referred to him as a Lion of Construction. Even his wife sometimes said to him, “Good thing I didn’t know at the time what a *Lion of Construction* you were.” Otherwise, he wouldn’t have had a chance with her, because when they were first starting out, she had someone more along the lines of an architect in mind for herself.

Kressdorf was amused by this, and in fact he’d been thinking just the opposite, *good thing she didn’t realize that I was still a nobody back then*. Because he was paying off those bouquets of roses on his credit card for years. Most people think a Lion of Construction gets his start with the larger contractors. These days if you plunk your first single-family house down on a field and it doesn’t collapse by the end of the day, instant Construction Lion. And Kressdorf, unfortunately, had been spinning his wheels, trying to get somewhere for years. He was nearly forty when he met the med student, and even by then, he still couldn’t really afford the expensive hotels.

His rise to the top only really began with the cabin in the Kitzbühel mountains. You should know, without cabins you don’t come into contracts. Mountain houses, ski lodges, today they teach you that in business school, but Kressdorf had to figure it all out on his own, and it took him the first half of his career. But once he did, he took all the money he’d earned in those first twenty years and put it into a real Kitzbühel throat-slitter—all for a cabin that was completely rotted out, only thing holding it together were the woodworms. And then, of course, bank directors, politicians, journalists, bishops, investors—suddenly they were all eating out of his hand. But I should add: a cabin isn’t a cabin isn’t a cabin. Because a tasteful mountain palace like the one Kressdorf had magically whipped up out of the woodworm dump—that had the small-town mayors lining up for years, and just to nab an appointment to throw back a quick schnapps with him.

But no mayors these days, of course, because only the innermost circle, i.e., high-level power meetings. Today there were only three of them sitting in the hunter’s den. We’re purely from their perspective. The girls were still upstairs sleeping, since it had gone on a bit late the night before, so they said, *we’ll let them sleep in a little today*.

The mood was terribly peaceful, and as Bank Director Reinhard remarked, “A day like this without a cell phone is like two weeks’ vacation with a cell phone.” Congressman Stachl nodded in such emphatic agreement that the flakes from his black beard went scattering, on account of neurodermatitis. But don’t go thinking that Congressman Stachl was just a generally emphatic nodder. Quite the opposite: Bank Director Reinhard’s cell phone bothered him, annoyed him, but so that Reinhard wouldn’t pick up on this, he nodded emphatically—camouflage, if you will. But the neurodermatitis, of course, wasn’t about to let itself be mistaken for something it wasn’t, and so the congressman couldn’t stop scratching his beard. A night at the cabin always had him itching four times as much, and then the itching would just annoy him all the more, i.e., catch-22. Just so you don’t get the wrong idea about where the fine layer of dust covering Aurelius Stachl’s side of the wooden table came from.

Bank Director Reinhard, on the other hand. For him, one would have to invent the word

“relaxed,” if it didn’t already exist. And I don’t just mean his paunch, which is often a point of confusion, and maybe his pleasant stoutness only got to be that stout because it’s got so many people in the deep freezer that it can’t keep up with the leftovers. But the strange thing about Reinhard was that he didn’t look fat, even though he was definitely hiding fifty, sixty kilos too many under his black turtleneck sweater. It wasn’t accredited against him, though. For a man of sixty, he looked more like a portly high school student who’s way ahead of everyone in school, except in gym class. He’s always so comfortably enthroned upon his chair, looking out from the thick lenses of the glasses perched on his plump face, but managing somehow to look imposing. And believe it or not, when the girls were brought in last night, you could tell right away that they preferred Reinhard over Stachl, even though Stachl is half as old, more athletic, tall, and slim, a real gladiator compared to Reinhard. And it definitely wasn’t because of the flaking skin on his face, either, because his beard covered it very well. But with Reinhard maybe instinctually the girls sensed something more benevolent, paternal.

And I can honestly say, in the mountains he truly was. He transformed into a benevolent person there. I don’t know if it was because of the altitude, the quietude, or simply the solitude of hunting. Reinhard himself marveled at how relaxed he always was in the mountains. That was why he liked coming up here so much. Day to day he had to forcibly suppress his benevolent side. What do you think would become of the bank if he were to direct it with his hunting-benevolence?

But Reinhard, of course, was a far too responsible person for that. He’d directed the bank very successfully for twenty years—hundreds, if not thousands, of young bank girls would have lost their jobs if Reinhard hadn’t done his so well. Then there was his own family at Klosterneuburg, always present at every birthday, all four kids. He even volunteered at the church when time permitted; above all, when his wife permitted, of course. Many people have wondered how Reinhard does it all. But it’s precisely because he’s so good at relaxing. And he hadn’t been as relaxed as he was today in a long time.

“That was a grand idea you had, banning cell phones here in the mountains,” he said to Kressdorf, and he smiled so contentedly that his beady eyes nearly disappeared completely behind the thick lenses of his glasses.

In truth, of course, it had been Bank Director Reinhard’s own idea. His express wish: no cell phones, not just out hunting but in the cabin, too. Because they still always called it “cabin,” even though Kressdorf had built it into a full-fledged mountain lodge. *No cell phones in the cabin*, Reinhard said, *because that’s why we go: to be in nature*. My god, a bank manager like him has an enormous amount of responsibility, he’s allowed to indulge in a little extra amusement now and then, a little humiliation on the side, by praising someone for an idea that had been forced on him. It’s a behavior related on many levels to this thing where you have to thank the person who slaps you in the face, but much friendlier, because no slap in the face, only praise. If he wanted something, all Reinhard had to do was whisper around everyone would immediately jump, and afterward he’d say, *that was a grand idea you had*.

Kressdorf wasn’t bothered by this. But Congressman Stachl was. He turned red every time Reinhard praised him like a little boy for something he hadn’t done. But Kressdorf only saw the big picture, i.e., the big contract. Because for a project like MegaLand, even a Lion of Construction can let a good-natured sadist have his fun and accept his praise for a cell phone ban that he himself imposed. And one thing you can’t forget: it was a project he would’ve

jumped at all over again, just like he had back when he bought the cabin with his last few bucks.

“I could watch that rabbit for hours,” Bank Director Reinhard said smiling, his stoic minister’s mouth beaming with satisfaction. And for my part: *I could watch that Reinhard smile for hours.* There was something about watching the animals feeding that was so peaceful to him that it had almost meant more to him than the hunt itself these past few years. And sometimes Stachl would even whisper blasphemously from behind a cupped hand: *Reinhard doesn’t even like to shoot anymore, the animals behind the glass are enough for him.*

You should know, a glass panel separated the hunters’ den from the rabbit pen. It’s all the rage these days with cabins, and it was Kressdorf who originally invented it. He’d had the glass wall installed with his last bit of cash at the time. But when *Hunting Review* did a multipage photo spread of his innovative idea, everyone copied it immediately, of course. Basically, this glass panel between the hunters’ den and the stables formed the basis of the whole Kressdorf empire, because people liked it, you wouldn’t believe. He hadn’t even demonstrated the one-way-mirror-at-the-press-of-a-button for them. No, just the plain glass function got people excited. So you’d be eating your bacon in the hunters’ den, drinking your schnapps, counting your millions, fondling your ill-gotten gains, and through the glass panel you could watch the animals in their innocent animal existence. Interesting, though. Reinhard wasn’t amused one bit when Congressman Stachl made a joke about the bunnies behind the glass. Because that was too vulgar for Reinhard. He expected a certain *niveau* from a congressman, even at the cabin.

Now that it was morning, the girls weren’t in the rabbit pen anymore, anyway. They slept till noon, which was a foreign world to Reinhard. He’d never understood sleeping in, because the morning was the most beautiful time of day for him, and every morning at six sharp: the five Tibetans.

“You’ll have to excuse me, I’ll just be a moment ...” Reinhard said to Kressdorf and pulled out his cell phone. Because that was the most important part of the deal, of course, that Reinhard should get to make at least one brief call, lifting the very ban, as it were, that Kressdorf supposedly had enacted. But always with contrite apology. Congressman Stachl had never dared, he just pretended he had diarrhea and made his important phone calls from the bathroom every five minutes.

And so, while Reinhard was on the phone in the hunters’ den, Stachl went to the bathroom again and turned his phone back on. Beneath his thick black hair his head was riddled with scars, one for every time it had bumped into the low ceiling in the cabin’s bathroom. At his height he couldn’t stand fully upright in there, and the congressman was a nervous telephoner as it was, fidgeting and gesticulating. Maybe his pent-up resentment toward Reinhard played a part, too, in him regularly hitting his head in the bathroom. If not on the window latch or the light fixture then on the deer rack or the cabinet that stored the toilet paper. Especially when a call startled him, he was at risk. Typical example: just now he forgot to stoop down on his way out the door. The text message had something to do with it, guaranteed. Because emergency. Kressdorf’s wife couldn’t get hold of her husband and it was urgent for him to call her.

“Now she’s given up,” one of the two gas station drunks said. The thin one, because the fat one was standing with his back to Herr Simon, but he had such a belly that his back brushed up against the neighboring table. And so you can see just how badly things were going for the chauffeur. That he hadn’t even noticed that his cell phone had been completely silent for ten minutes. You should know, when he still couldn’t get hold of Kressdorf after three tries, he gave up. And I suspect he only tried in the first place because he knew about the cell phone ban, and so it would have been a huge coincidence if Kressdorf had picked up. But Herr Simon didn’t turn off his cell phone after his pointless attempts, either. Instead he remained snug in that painful middle ground, without a solution and without any refuge, ergo triggering “Castles Made of Sand.” But when it suddenly stopped, it didn’t strike him as suspicious. It pains me when I think how slow his brain was compared to the gas station drunks, who noticed it before he did.

“Mine calls all day, too,” the thin one announced, loudly enough for the gas station attendant to hear it, too, from where he was putting away a stack of frozen Napoli pizzas in the refrigerated cases. “I don’t know what it is with women.”

Herr Simon took advantage of the gas station attendant’s brief glance over to point to his empty cup. And the gas station attendant gave a nod as if to say: *I’ll just quickly put away the pizza boxes so that they don’t start thawing, and then I’ll bring you another espresso.*

“That they have to have their beaks flapping all day long,” the thin one said.

“Tee tee tee tee tee tee tee!” the beer belly said in a high-pitched voice and made a motion like a bird’s beak with his chubby little left hand, a babbling goose, as it were.

“Not picking up’s the only thing that helps sometimes,” the thin one said. “Right, Milan?”

“Tee tee tee tee tee tee tee!” went the beer belly. I don’t know why the beer belly had such a high-pitched voice, presumably the female hormones in hops, and if you’re a man then you get breasts and a high-pitched voice, but what would be interesting is whether that’s true for nonalcoholic beer, too.

As he walked past, Milan said, “Your wife’s always on the phone with her boyfriend. Yugoslav lover!”

The thin one laughed because he didn’t have a wife anyway, so the comment couldn’t really be taken as an insult, and in fact, was even very nice of Milan, who otherwise didn’t give the thin one an answer very often because when you’re a gas station attendant, your head grows weary of your gas station drunks over the course of the day.

“Tee tee tee tee tee tee tee!” went the belly-talker’s sausage fingers again. It had definitely been fifteen minutes already since Jimi Hendrix last sang, and Herr Simon still didn’t think anything of it. When Milan came with the espresso, the chauffeur asked him, “And your wife? What’s her name?”

“What’s your wife’s name?” Milan asked, smirking, and passed the question along to the thin one.

“Angelina Jolie.” The thin guy looked as serious as if he were providing the name of his wife to the emergency room at the hospital.

“Heidi Klump.” The fat one was quick to introduce his wife, too.

Herr Simon didn't laugh, though. “The woman on the surveillance tape,” he pressed Mila. “The red-haired one who shops here every day.”

“No clue. She lives right over there. I always see her going into that house. But her name is no idea. She often comes in twice a day and buys—”

What she buys, Herr Simon didn't catch. But that you can't criticize him for, because it was drowned out by the forceful shouts and by the loud clattering of the CD rack and the box of lighters and the flashlight special and the lottery ticket dispenser and the keychains, all crashing to the floor.

He shouldn't have overlooked the fact that his cell phone had been silent the whole time he'd been in the bathroom. The gas station's bathroom, *picobello*, immaculate, that never happens—but pay attention, Herr Simon had left his cell phone lying out on the table, didn't think anything of it and when he came back from the bathroom it wasn't ringing anymore. So it's almost his unconsciousness that you have to find fault with. Every human being has secret desires, don't ask, and it's possible he just wanted to be caught finally, possible he even wished for it somewhere in the very back of his head, yearned for the fat drunk to seize the opportunity and pick up the phone on a lark while he was in the bathroom.

Herr Simon wasn't angry at the gas station drunk for it afterward. On the contrary, he even invited him out after the funeral. He was only mad at himself, and I should add that, for someone who used to be on the police force, there's reason not to be purely happy in a situation where your cell phone stops pestering you. Because when relentless phone terrorizing has been going on for more than an hour and suddenly comes to a stop, you have to ask yourself why. It's like how if your spouse stops nagging you, then you know he's cheating on you. And if the parents of your kidnapped child stop calling, then you know they've got you.

It was only at that moment when the police officer was behind him, grabbing him between the legs in a brutal manner, that Herr Simon realized amid his shriek of pain that he hadn't understood the officer's question correctly, even though he had yelled it into his ear: “Where have you got the kid?”

I tell you, though, at that second Peinhaupt wasn't exactly in prime condition to receive an immediate answer. No, he had a scandal to defuse that his two colleagues—who were securing the escape routes, Zand, Erich the gas station entrance and Sykora the back exit—had surprised him with on the sterilization table that fateful morning. After the creepy phone call with the gas station drunk, the clinic director's panic became Peinhaupt's chance of redemption, of course. And so maybe you grab on all the more doggedly, even though you don't realize yet that you're standing right behind the biggest case of your life.

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