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## **English sample translation**

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I flicked through the atlas, finding the map of Germany at last. So that's where Paderborn was. I'd thought it was somewhere else entirely. Berlin really was much closer to Hamburg than to Warsaw; Falk was right. As I stared at the connecting routes to Berlin, I thought about our drive back the next day; the long, dull motorway through East Germany, the lay-bys you weren't allowed to leave, the faces of the border soldiers, always identical. The Wall. The isolated city: the pale blue blotch in the middle of all the pink on the map. The rest of the blue was so far away. It didn't really belong together. Berlin: the blotch in the middle of nowhere.

I slammed the atlas shut and pretended I needed the toilet so I could go downstairs to the old fogies, who had started dancing by now.

The next day we were back in the car at last, and Wiebke took the turn-off for Hanover. As tight-lipped as Wiebke and Klaus had been at the party yesterday, they were all the more chatty now, complaining about anything and everything.

'The worst thing was the speeches! So dull and stiff, and every word read straight off the page. Oh, it was awful,' Klaus shook his head.

'And all their questions about our coal stoves, as if there was nothing more important in life than heated bathroom tiles!' Wiebke blustered. Klaus didn't reply. He hated lugging the coal up from the basement to the fourth floor every day in winter, and he was glad Falk had taken over from him.

Falk grouched about the car; he never knew where to put his long legs.

'I don't understand why they're so curious about how much the Berlin pay bonus is; I don't want to be interrogated about our bank balance!' Klaus spat a cherrystone out of the window, but it left a long violet stain on the glass.

'And the same stupid question every time, about what it's like renting a place. As if everyone had to live in a semi-detached! They're not right in the head.' I watched Wiebke's face in the rear-view mirror as she spoke. It was getting redder and redder. When she suddenly put her foot down, I grabbed hold of her headrest in panic.

‘You’re right, you really are,’ Klaus immediately concurred, placing a calming hand on her thigh. ‘And we do live in a *piano nobile* apartment, after all! High ceilings and stucco mouldings – they can’t even imagine anything like that.’

Wiebke didn’t reply to that. She had once hinted that the mouldings on our living room ceiling were too *Wilhelminian*. This comment had prompted a never-ending discussion with Klaus, which began before Bismarck’s time and ended in a tangle of unclarified issues, raised hypotheses and general dissatisfaction. In the end, a rather annoyed Falk had said to Wiebke, ‘Isn’t Wilhelminian a synonym for “hard to dust” for you? Then just say so to start with and don’t load your words down with so much ornamentation...’

Falk hadn’t turned up in the room we were staying in until four in the morning, saying he’d been on a ‘walk in the forest’. I was sure he must have come across something exciting, a tumbledown witch’s house, a car junkyard, a dead animal, something he was keeping to himself. The whole extended family was upset, and Klaus had trouble explaining to them that there was probably no need to worry. Of course, none of the folks had been particularly pleased in the first place with Falk just stuffing his face with food and then disappearing right away.

‘They’re a bit too dunked in cream, you know?’ he launched in. ‘The first thing Aunt Gisela asked me at breakfast was whether I didn’t need a knife in my pocket to defend myself in Berlin. And Uwe, that banker asshole, wanted to know if it’s true that the anarchos in Kreuzberg chuck bricks through shop windows and then just squat down in other people’s houses until the police throw them out. I thought I was hearing things, I swear.’

Wiebke put her foot right down, scaring me again.

The drive from Paderborn to the Helmstedt border crossing point was long and strenuous. Falk and I argued with Wiebke at a service station, because we wanted to get French fries but Wiebke said we had enough packed lunch and we shouldn’t stuff ourselves with fast food. So we ate rye bread sandwiches with dehydrated cheese spread, an absolute vitamin boost. Klaus read the newspaper in the car, which annoyed Wiebke because she wanted to be ‘at least entertained,’ seeing as she had to do all the driving because he was shirking out of it. But Falk and I weren’t in the mood for chatting either. There was a huge tailback at the border crossing point – not

that I'd ever experienced it any other way in all the years. The usual game set in: everyone thought this line or that line of cars was moving particularly quickly. Whenever Wiebke had just changed lanes, almost ramming the car into some idiot's fender, the line stopped moving. Then we changed lanes again, and the same thing started all over again. Seeing as it was hot and my parents were still tense from visiting the family, this idle waiting was especially nerve-racking. Falk needed the toilet and wanted to pee next to the car, but Wiebke reasoned with him, saying she had no desire to pay a fine just because he was so lazy. Falk exacerbated the situation even more by playing around with a hash sachet, but this time Wiebke didn't humour him by getting wound up. Instead, she made an angry grab at Klaus' newspaper and shouted: 'Give me a neck massage!' Klaus obediently complied.

We waited a whole hour, and Wiebke said the GDR was a country where waiting took up half the inhabitants' days. They had to wait at the shops, when they wanted to go to a restaurant, wait to buy a car, rent a flat – always waiting and waiting.

'Is that why they call their cars Wartburgs? You know: *warten, Wartburg?*' sniggered Falk, but Wiebke ignored him.

'All the waiting wouldn't bother me if you got something half-decent in the end,' said Klaus. 'But the food, the cars, the clothes... they're all just so... dull.'

'Did you buy your grey suit in East Berlin, by the way?' asked Falk. Klaus couldn't help grinning, and then tugged at Falk's earlobe. 'Oh, you! You're a real pest, you are.'

'Is it true there are so many East German spies in the West?' I asked. Wiebke responded with a brief lecture about how the West sent just as many spies to the East, and then Wiebke and Klaus had ended up out of the blue on one of their favourite subjects: German politics. No more interesting talk of spies. They always had to go all the way back to Bismarck to explain every modern-day phenomenon. This time it was about guilt and repression, about reconstruction and misguided 'frustration energies', everything amalgamated into an incomprehensible mush, and Klaus quoted Alexander Mishmash, as I called the philosopher, something or other about the inability to be sad, although I thought Wiebke and Klaus were anything but a prime example of that inability (I later realized Mitscherlich was thinking more of Grandma Helene's

stubborn jollity than Wiebke and Klaus' chronic *weltschmerz*). At the end of their parallel monologues both countries, East and West Germany, were fundamentally on the wrong track, misguided, everything was in a wretched state of affairs. And as ever, the ray of hope for Wiebke and Klaus was the city to which they had 'fled', the city that was neither West nor East Germany, but was rather what they called – and this sounded very strange to me – 'a fenced-in free space'. So a kind of huge rathole like the vacant lot at home?

We had to present our passports through the window, the soldier making an impatient face because Falk took his time to hand his over, and then he let us pass with an unmoving expression.

The motorway was immediately different to drive on. We drove over raised scars at about fifty-metre intervals, a monotonous rumble. And the colour of the traffic signs was lighter, paler. Instead of brightly lit bungalows at the lay-bys, there were just a few sparse seats. We made one stop because Wiebke was tired, sitting at a wooden picnic table bolted to the ground to consume our last dry rye bread sandwiches and lukewarm chocolate milk. Wiebke gave us a *Nimm2* boiled sweet each for dessert. Presumably because they contained vitamin supplements. There were a couple of huge trucks in the lay-by, with shit-encrusted tissues scattered on the grass. Then we got back in the car and the opaque front of green and anthracite fir trees flew past us on both sides; they wouldn't let up until the next border crossing. The two-and-a-half-hour drive through the GDR always felt like an eternity: trees, trees, trees, pale signs, lines of cars, you weren't allowed to go above a hundred km/h, the breaks in the asphalt, and occasionally large blocks of flats in the distance, industry. The only time anything changed was when we passed the sign for Magdeburg. Wiebke was so excited that she drove a tiny bit too fast every time: 'Look, Magdeburg Cathedral!' And then Klaus turned his head obediently every time, but Falk and I didn't bother any more, and sometimes Klaus put his hand on Wiebke's thigh.

We'd arrived at the second border crossing point. It wasn't Dreilinden, thank goodness, where I'd been scared as a child because of the Russian tank on a plinth facing Berlin. I couldn't help thinking of Aunt Gisela for a moment. We joined one of the longest queues, which I found rather fatalistic, but Wiebke said she was 'sick of

arching to and fro.’ We were all tired from the long journey, not in the mood to argue. We moved forwards at a snail’s pace.

I remembered once waiting seven hours at a border crossing point, on the way to go hiking in the Czechoslovakian mountains and visit a group of artists in Brno who Klaus was writing about, and then our car was searched from top to bottom. That was before Falk started smoking hash, thank goodness. I thought Brno was deadly dull – which mortally offended Wiebke and Klaus. We stayed in a high-rise block, the porter was an unfriendly fatty, and everything was the colour of lead and miserable. The facades of the houses, the taste of the bread rolls, the music in the cafés – everything. But Wiebke and Klaus dashed into one church and one museum after the next, took photos of each other on a bridge and darted down dark old streets that reminded me of Kreuzberg – which Klaus said was ‘nonsense’. Wiebke and Klaus did the same things in Brno as in Paris or Strasbourg, Rome or Oslo, but I felt different. I could tell people were looking at me. Three days in, I came down with sinusitis and had to stay in the sparsely fitted hotel room, no matter how much candy and well-meaning cheering up I was offered.

The Ford Granada in front of us was obviously being driven by a *Monchhichi* fan. Six mini-*Monchhichis* dangled in the rear window. One was sitting in a tiny UFO, another was wearing sunglasses and bathing trunks, the next one had a doctor’s coat with a little red cross on its chest. I stared and stared, and we stayed right where we were. The Granada had two rolls of toilet paper under crocheted covers on the shelf behind the back seat. There was a blue atlas from an *Aral* petrol station next to them. The cover was corrugated from the heat.

Falk was asleep, his black tangles hanging down over his slim face. Falk looked good, I thought, even though he was so pale and had dark circles under his eyes. I’d noticed how soft his lips were once when I’d put a *Maoam* chew in his mouth.

We moved half a car’s-length ahead and stopped again. The radio newsreader reported that the freighter Cap Anamur had returned to Germany after three years. It had saved the lives of over nine thousand five hundred Vietnamese refugees. The news inspired Klaus to plant a surprising kiss on Wiebke’s cheek.

At long, long last we had got through the crossing point. The Berlin ring-road and the Avus motorway – there was no need to stay under 100 km/h, so Wiebke put her foot down in high spirits and the speedometer in our clapped-out Scirocco shot up to 150. Every time we passed the border a tiny weight fell from our shoulders, as if somewhere in the back of our minds we were scared of not getting home one day after all. When I saw the Memorial Church, the tramps outside Zoo station, our neighbour Herr Pech coming out of the huge *Beate Uhse* sex shop, and when a pigeon shat on our windscreen, I knew I was back home.

Wiebke and Klaus were cheering up visibly, whispering about something or other. They always acted as if West Germany – or Rest Germany, as Klaus called it – didn't agree with them physically; too hot, too sunny, too clean, too pretty, their bodies just collapsed under it all. It was drizzling. Two Turkish men were having a fight outside McDonald's, the usual emaciated girls with black matted hair were sitting underneath the disused police traffic-light control tower, painting their fingernails. With renewed energy, Wiebke started telling Klaus about some exhibition openings or other being held that week. Everything was back to normal. As we drove past the music conservatory and the *Freie Volksbühne* theatre, I got excited – here was our house. Our backyard. Our Hauser! Wiebke took an eternity to park the Scirocco properly. Klaus sat next to her, annoyed but not saying anything seeing as he wasn't driving himself. I couldn't wait to get out of the stuffy car; after nine hours' sitting down, putting up with Klaus and Falk's constant smoking, I'd had more than enough.

We trudged towards our house, loaded down with luggage. Klaus moaned about how heavy his suitcase was. That was all his own fault, though. Did he have to take an entire library along with him on holiday? I kicked a tin can along the road. The first thing I did, back in Berlin. Unfortunately, I was rather out of practice. The can crashed into Klaus' legs. If only it'd been Wiebke's legs, she probably wouldn't even have noticed! Klaus turned on his heel, irritated, gesticulating wildly and rolling his eyes. He seemed to need another holiday. The moment we got inside the flat, the four of us scattered in all directions. Wiebke vanished to one of the wooden platforms erected around the place, probably the one with her beloved canopy bed on it, Klaus was off to one of the balconies, Falk immediately turned the sign on his door to

*Closed*, the punk band Die Haut instantly booming out of his speakers with *Die faulen Hunde von Tijuana*.

I vanished straight behind the curtains in my room. Hauser had gone up on the roof, where The Olm was sitting by the barbecue with Herr Söylesin and Frau Koderitz. *Come on Eileen* rang out across the backyards from somewhere or other. In the background, I could see Herr Kanz in his section of the roof garden. Herr Olk and Herr Kanz got on better on the roof than usual, seemingly united by sharing joints up there. Falk tended to go up when nobody else was there – presumably so that he could blank out the ‘interpersonal crap’.

I’d have so liked to be sitting up there alone with Hauser and looking out across the rooftops, over our dark backyard, my way to school, the pharmacy, Herr Adán, the peepshow, Klaus, the police control tower... all the way to Tierra del Fuego. I stared for a long time at the glowing tip of Hauser’s joint.

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