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Time Out

"You always made him into something he wasn't," Ruth had said, wrapped in her certainty. "You're still doing it now."

There was haze over the grass, in which here and there the coils of the garden hose gleamed. The birch branches were almost motionless, the terrace table still looked at it did yesterday, plates, bowls and glasses, covered in dew overnight.

Lothar threw off the blanket and stood up. He drank a glass of water in the kitchen, showered downstairs, in the guest bathroom, and dressed. Before he left the house, he turned round, a pilot's habit, the snapshot before what may be the last journey. The cushions of the easy chairs were out of place and the settee cover was on the floor, the wind had blown a few leaves through the open sliding door onto the carpet. Ruth still seemed to be sleeping, there was nothing to be heard from upstairs.

He could drive to the airport. The clock on the dashboard said 7.11 a.m. and a plane for Athens started at around nine – there was sure to be some connecting flight and with a bit of luck he would be climbing the narrow paths of one of the eastern islands in the abating heat of the afternoon. He had the resinous smell of the pines in his nose again, which had

accompanied him on his hikes, the beguiling scent of thyme rising in clouds from the maquis. At the beginning curiosity already drove him onto the next ferry after only a few days, later his rhythm changed, he retraced familiar routes, in order to get to know the changes in the landscapes and the light, would often follow a dried-up riverbed to a pebble beach, because he couldn't believe that the absence of people was not mere chance. Above a steep coast he wandered through villages, whose restored houses were hidden behind fieldstone walls, wished he were living here himself, could own such a fortress which defied the storms and from which in the evenings he would rumble down dusty serpentines in a van to the harbour village. Above all he couldn't get enough of the silence. As long as he was there it had extinguished his past.

Yet when he thought of Ruth's silence, if he called her later on from another country, he rejected the plan again. He left the exit for the airport behind, drove past office blocks, the Nexxus House and the Blue Towers. The cold gleaming Olivetti Towers seemed to be floating. Lothar pressed his head against the rest, straightened both arms and closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, there was not a single car to be seen on the broad ribbon of the road.

He had always felt the impersonality of his work to be a pleasant side effect of the life of a pilot, the automated sequence of actions, the clearly defined requirements, which made it possible to abstract from himself and others. He had flown around the world countless times, yet rarely had he been forced to come closer to someone than he wanted to. Distance

was part of his work like the uniform, and the rigid flight scheduling itself ensured distance: After a week at most the cockpit crews even on the long haul flights broke up again, and so it was easy for him to remain aloof. Of course he had gone to bars or restaurants with his co-pilots and the cabin crew and had dropped some flying stories and innocuous family anecdotes into the conversation. He had enjoyed the shared euphoria when at a height of two, three or five thousand meters the diffuse grey of the clouds had opened up and sunlight had flooded the cockpit; he had liked the superficial feeling of togetherness and the casual manners – but above all the lack of commitment behind it. Each had remained an observer of the other, an identically trained partner, who responded to the always identical commands with the always identical responses.

Lothar was all the more surprised when this professional reserve was washed away by a wave of sympathy, after word had got round of what had happened to his son. Colleagues he had never flown with called him in order to offer their condolences. The chairman of the board personally wrote a letter, and the pilot's association sent a wreath to the funeral. He was surprised that complete strangers should sympathise. And it confused him, because their shock seemed to be greater than his own – at least at first, when he was forced to be composed by the organisational demands, the public appearances and by Ruth's despair: at the funeral, during the headmaster's speech before the memorial concert or when Jakob's friends from the gliding club came to give Ruth and him a commemorative volume. It was Lothar who invited the embarrassed and silent little group into the living room, received the gift and turned the pages from the first to the last. Jakob in the air or grimacing behind the joystick; Jakob with a beer glass in his raised hand, at one of the summer parties. He forced himself to read each farewell wish, each clumsy poem, long after Ruth

had left the room sobbing. And it was also he who drove Merten to school in those weeks, picked up the phone when it rang, opened the door to the neighbours, gratefully accepted the pot with soup or the bulging bags of food and spoke in a subdued voice for the family. During the day Ruth hardly left her bed, not until sunset did she come down the carpeted stairs barefoot, sat down with him in her dressing gown and Lothar told her what he had done in the course of the day. Jakob was no longer there, he was erased, it was impossible to talk about him. Instead reports about who had offered help and what the woman at the grocer's had given him. Lothar repeated the conversation with the nervous young priest, which Ruth then – interrupted by long phases of silence – repeated in turn with astonishment in her voice as if she was surprised that her speech was possible at all, that after one breath another still followed.

Then, from one day to the next, Ruth began to feel better. Worrying about Merten gave her something to hold on to. He was hardly eating, didn't want to see any of his friends and had difficulty concentrating during lessons. She helped him with his homework, met teachers, discussed him with a school psychologist – while Lothar, freed from his role, spent weeks on the settee in the living room, again and again shaken by fits of silent weeping, which began as suddenly as they stopped and left behind a dry hoarse pain in the throat. Comfort was provided by the rituals he soon forced himself to take up again, the routine manual tasks in the garden, the preparation of meals, the simple concentration on the chopping of vegetables – and the prospect of finally flying again. He waited until Ruth started doing the shopping, until she invited friends round with whom she talked quietly, sitting on the settee, while he sat in his study with the door open and pretended he wasn't listening. Day after day he kept putting it off, and then it was she who raised it with him.

“Don’t you want to start work again?” she asked from the bedroom as he was standing by the wash-basin in the bathroom. In the mirror he saw her in bed, a pillow at her back, her hands motionless on the cover.

He was asked to come for a talk on the fourth floor of a side building. He was prepared, knew what they could ask of him and what not:

Nevertheless the anger that this conversation was taking place at all hardened his jaw muscles, as he found himself in an air-conditioned room sitting opposite an overweight man in his early fifties, who asked in a serious voice:

“How are you?”

Lothar said nothing.

The man looked at him attentively through rimless glasses, deep furrows on his forehead, lips pursed expectantly.

“Unfortunately it’s a question I have to ask you.”

“I’m feeling well,” said Lothar. “I’m feeling” – he hesitated – “better again.”

“What are you doing? How do you spend your days?”

“I work in the garden. I go for walks. But most of the time I sit around and do nothing.

“Can you sleep?”

“Yes.”

“Without drugs?”

“Yes.”

“And your wife? How is your wife? Does she want to work again?”

“Later perhaps. She’s taking care of our son. The other one. Merten is still very confused.”

The man nodded.

Does Merten, I mean, does he get professional help?”

“For a little while now, yes.”

“And you? Do you have someone you can talk to? Outside the family?”

Lothar said nothing.

“In such cases there is the possibility of taking professional advice. Perhaps it would be helpful?”

“I want to fly. Do my job. That would be helpful.”

The man placed thumb and index finger on a glass ashtray, pushed it back and forward.

“But no-one would think the worse of you, if you wanted to move into management, in order to be with your family more.”

The looked at one another, until Lothar looked away. The shelves next to the door were made of the same tropical wood as the desk. Among the files, brochures and text books he could not see any private photo. “Why don’t you sleep on it? Talk to your wife?”

“I don’t need to do that. It’s not necessary. Listen: I’m not a security risk.”

The man snapped the clip of a silver fountain pen against the cap several times. Then he turned on the chair to the window, looked at the grey sky above the city forest, lost in thought as if he was alone. They can’t force you, they can’t force you to do anything, thought Lothar almost cheerfully, as his gaze fell on an African mask which hung on the wall behind the desk. For a while there was only the murmuring of the air conditioning to be heard. Then the man turned back to Lothar, placed both hands on the desktop and smiled briefly.

“Hand in a flying fitness certificate.”

A few weeks later Lothar flew to Cairo with an experienced co-pilot, who would soon start his training as a captain. Before he bent over a flight chart, he said:

“I heard about it.” He pressed his lips together. “It’s good to have you on board again.”

In all the months in which his colleagues expressed their sympathy – during briefing in the crew room, in the cockpit or the hotel lobby, just before everyone retired to their rooms – no one spoke to him about the murder of his son. A reluctantly mumbled “Thanks”, a searching glance – or not even that – then everyone went back, relieved so it seemed, to the daily routine. Possibly people laughed less on his tours of duty, possibly the cabin crew responded more attentively to his requests, possibly hands remained on his arms a touch longer than before, but otherwise everything was as before – except for one thing: In his presence no one talked about their families any more. This silence protected him, how much, he realised one afternoon in Seoul. Three of them had gone for a meal, and as he was coming back from the toilet, he heard the co-pilot say to the chief steward: “If something like that had happened to me, I would kill the man. No mucking about. There’s no other way.”

Holding his breath, Lothar stood behind a wall of bamboo, less than six feet away from his invisible colleagues. A clink, as if one of them had just set down his tea bowl. The next moment he found himself on a pavement as broad as an avenue, which was populated almost exclusively by young people. Rain clouds hung so low over the city that the upper

floors of the skyscrapers disappeared in them. He took a couple of steps, turned round, paused, and allowed himself to be pushed along by the crowd, past electronic goods shops and comic shops the size of supermarkets, past amusement arcades from which came a deafening bleeping, banging and howling, and finally ended up in a smoky bar, in which businessmen crowded round wooden tables. He drank all evening, soju, a mild rice liquor, above the bar photos of Korean mountaineers, who – encased in quilted jackets – posed happily against a background of precipitous peaks, while the hysterical laughter of the other guests surged ever more loudly against his pleasantly empty consciousness.

Lothar didn't go out with his colleagues any more. After going into a hotel room he kicked his shoes into the corner, took off his uniform, closed the curtains and took a look at the minibar. He poured tonic into a glass, added a generous amount of gin and drank as he zapped through the channels. Crocodiles drifting in brackish rivers; women dressed in magnificent silk garments, who on longtail boats were cutting across the smooth surface of a lake; the good-natured smile of the woman weather forecaster on CNN; airport lounges, turning into facades, which reflected a bleached blue. When he woke up with a dry mouth, the TV light spread changing colours across the walls. He registered the rumbling in his stomach, groped his way to the bathroom, splashed water on his face and left the room. Whatever the city he sooner or later ended up in the quarters with the hot food stalls, the student bars, in the jumble of lanes of the old town, where, usually standing, he wolfed something down. Once, lying on a park bench, he opened his eyes and didn't know where he was. A bird was making a noise in the plane tree above him, the sea must be nearby, because the air was fresh and salty, but he could remember neither a flight, nor how he had got there. He listened for voices, for

scraps of language, but apart from distant roar of traffic he could hear nothing, and when he finally turned his head, he saw behind the tree tops of the park the futurist skyscrapers of Shanghai.

In Delhi, he remembered, in his drunkenness he stopped in front of a snake charmer, a young boy no older than ten, who immediately stopped playing his flute and looked silently at the ground. For hours he squatted in the windy entrance of an office building and waited, not knowing for what. He got on buses stopping in the street and, squeezed between the bodies of strangers, let himself be taken to the last stop, to the slums and satellite towns, to the mud hut zones, which all the travel guides warned the reader against. In Lagos the smell of the carcass of a rotting dog at the edge of a market turned his stomach, children watched laughing as he vomited against a wall – yet he was never attacked, threatened or robbed. He had been, Lothar thought now, as the gentle slopes of the Rhön hills passed by, he had been untouchable. And every time he had somehow found his way back to the hotel, had appeared punctually for the departure of the shuttle bus, shaved, his uniform neat, pulling the trolley case with his left hand, met with a friendly greeting from his colleagues. Ruth said nothing to him either. Half the night he had watched the swaying of the birch branches from the settee, and then when he stiffly made his way upstairs, quietly, so as not to wake Merten, and had lain down carefully beside her in bed, she looked at him with wide open eyes. He waited for her to say something, glanced, his hands folded on his chest, at the shadow of his foot against the sloping ceiling, but when he looked at her again, her eyes were shut.

At this time he expected every day that the paralysis, which had bound him to his bed for several weeks after Jakob's death, would overcome

him again. He had for days been incapable of moving then. His bones had ached, as if someone was scratching at them with a knife, his skin had become coarse and stretched, as if an unfamiliar organ were shedding a substance which made his flesh swell up. He feared that his legs would fail to function, that during a flight he would no longer find the strength to operate the necessary switches. But that was not the case. He did what needed to be done. Only his sensitivity to noise grew, his irritability.

“Hey,” he shouted through the cockpit door, as an engineer’s screwdriver scratched loudly across a metal surface while repairing a locker shortly before take-off in Singapore. “Hey, you, amateur, do you have to do that?”

The man put down the tool.

“Is there a problem?”

“Sure is. Your incompetence is getting on my nerves.”

“Sorry.” He raised his hand appeasingly. “No reason to be rude.”

The man was small, stocky, he wore dark blue overalls, his hair was covered in a film of dust, and when he turned away to continue working, Lothar said:

“Leave my plane immediately.”

The engineer’s eyebrows shot up. For a moment he looked through one of the windows, shaking his head in disbelief. Then he came closer, while a

stewardess stood stiffly in the passage with a frozen smile. He came so close, that Lothar could see himself in the other's eyes, a man in a dove blue collar, wearing a ridiculous captain's cap.

“Your plane?” he repeated, and then he withdrew and the stewardess began frantically laying out magazines on a trolley. Lothar looked across the apron. And as he looked at the other planes in their prescribed stopping positions and the follow-me cars dashing back and forward he became aware again – for the first time in a long while – of the confinement of the cockpit, the curving walls, the tightly calculated space between head and ceiling, behind him the back-rest, as if grown together with his back. Suddenly he thought of the immeasurable power of the sleeping turbines, while the palm of his hand throbbed, as if it was grasping the throttle – and yet both hands were lying calmly in his lap. He looked at the co-pilot, wanted to say something. Then he looked out again. It was so hot that the air above the asphalt was dancing.

Shortly afterwards two airport police appeared. They asked Lothar to breathe into the mouthpiece of a breathalyser and finally asked him – after first one and then the other had read the result on the green display – to accompany them.

Given the “exceptional life situation” he was once again offered the option of moving over to management, if he agreed to take a course of therapy. He refused and discovered in surprise that the need to drink had disappeared again only a few weeks after his dismissal.

Inviting cumulus clouds billowed out in the sky. When Lothar reached Weyhers, he halted in a car park behind the church, got out and went into the shop in which he and Jakob had bought food supplies for their glider flights together. He walked hesitantly down the aisles, scrutinised an assistant who was kneeling in front of the wine shelves and placing bottles on them. Picked up a wrapped currant loaf and put it back again. Stood in front of the apples in the fruit section for a long time, before joining the queue at the checkout with a bar of chocolate. Outside the traffic was heavy, most of the cars rolling by would follow the winding roads up to the Wasserkuppe. He resolved to drive past the parking lots, the runway, the restaurants and the museum to the hangar in which Jakob's glider was in the trailer. He would turn the car round on the forecourt and reverse as close as possible to the doors. He would get out and go to the trailer, without paying any attention to whoever might be there. He would release the hand brake and slowly pull it past the other trailers to the exit, couple it, loop the rip cord around the hook, push the connection into the socket, get into his car. And if everything went smoothly, he would leave the site again a few minutes later, without having exchanged a word with anyone. As he stood at the checkout, he saw his fifteen year-old son, as he came towards him on the tarmac, deliberately casual, a proud smile on his face, after he had completed the final handicap flight in style.

“It was good, wasn't it?”

“Pretty good.”

The cashier looked at him in a friendly way.

“I’m sorry,” said Lothar.

“Could you please put your purchases on the belt.”

(Translated by Martin Chalmers)