



**Jakob Nolte**

**Short Book on Tobias**

**Novel**

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Sample translation by Laura Wagner

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Due to an optical illusion, it looked like the rotor blades were moving slowly or hardly at all, but that wasn't true. The helicopter landed on the field in front of Tobias. Leaves and twigs were whirled around. He was cold, there was a roaring sound in his ears, and even though he knew what time it was, he rolled up his sleeve and looked at his watch. It was just after ten. Worried that he could start to become nauseous, he had only had a cup of coffee this morning. Now his stomach was rumbling.

He walked towards the machine slowly. A tear welled up behind his glasses, quivered and wafted away. Tobias held on to his hat. His scarf stuck out at a right angle from his neck. Since his coat was fastened with buttons instead of a zip, the cold air reached his chest. He had put the feather-down waistcoat he wore underneath the coat in winter back in the wardrobe on the first day of spring. Only one of the men in the cockpit was looking at him. The other was adjusting the instruments. Tobias knocked on the window.

»Excuse me,« he yelled. The co-pilot opened the front door. »I'm Tobias.« The co-pilot pulled a mobile phone from his pocket and showed Tobias a photo of himself on which he still sported a full head of hair. »Yes,« shouted Tobias. The man pointed at his headset to signal that he couldn't hear him over the noise. »Ah, I see,« yelled Tobias. Then the co-pilot pointed at the image on his phone again and then back at Tobias. Tobias pointed at the photo and then at himself and gave a thumbs-up.

»It's Tobias,« the co-pilot said into the microphone of his headset. Only then did the pilot turn off the engine. With a sound that resembled a record coming to a stop after the player

is turned off, the rotor blades spun slower and slower. It was a quiet day. Here and there, they heard a rustling, chirping or branches falling. Suddenly, a gunshot exploded in the nearby forest, followed by two more abrupt shots a short moment later.

»Tobias,« said the pilot, »come take a seat in here.«

»Hey.«

»That's my brother,« said the pilot and pointed at the co-pilot.

»Hey,« said the co-pilot. When they pulled down their microphones to their chins, Tobias realised how similar they looked. Their movements were almost completely in synch.

»Are you ready?« the pilot asked.

»I think so,« said Tobias.

»Nice,« said the pilot. The co-pilot opened the rear door for Tobias and helped him climb in. He explained the seat belt and how to use the headset.

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Tobias and his boyfriend Tobias tracked the queue right into Alexandergarten. They were surprised that there were so many people already gathered there but faced the waiting time calmly. They had bought coffee, muffins with egg and cheese and ice cream at a fast-food restaurant. It was one of those vices Tobias only indulged when on vacation: ice cream for breakfast. The two of them assumed that they would have to wait in line for more than an hour until they would be let into Lenin's Mausoleum. Tobias had stuck his sunglasses into his hair.

»Finally,« he said.

»It'll be great,« Tobias said.

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Tobias handed Tobias carrots and a zucchini and asked him to chop them. When asked how big the pieces should be, he said that Tobias could decide that for himself. He cut every two centimetres at a slight angle. Tobias' boyfriend now added the rest to some red onion and rosemary that were already frying in the pan. He also sprinkled a little sugar over everything. The pan sizzled every time a new ingredient touched the coating. They would have rice with it. Tobias set the table and took a seat. He started to tell his boyfriend about the e-mails he had been exchanging for a few days with a priest he was friends with and that had dealt with the smile of an angel initially and then with the term »explosive-stiff« eventually and he wanted to

know if he could think of an example for it. Tobias asked him how he knew the priest because he had never heard of him before. Tobias replied that he knew him from the seminar. Tobias said that he found love letters explosive-stiff. Tobias agreed and praised him for his astuteness. They laughed. Tobias filled the vegetables and the rice into two bowls and put them on the table. He noticed that salt and pepper were missing and got them off the spice rack. Tobias said that it tasted fantastic. However, he criticised the fact that the carrots had a little too much bite still but blamed himself for that.

He did the dishes while Tobias ran a bath. They had agreed to take a bath together every Wednesday and to tell each other everything that was going on with them for sixty minutes and without interruptions, since it was easy to take the other for granted when you lived together and shared pretty much everything. One of them usually cried and afterwards they were happy. They had a free-standing tub and when Tobias got into the room, most of his boyfriend had already disappeared behind a mountain of foam. Tobias got undressed and sat down opposite him. His butt touched the hot water, and he gasped audibly.

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For his 25th birthday Tobias had received a HTC One M8 in gunmetal grey from his brother. Before that he had a Huawei, which allowed you to play Angry Birds, take photos and listen to music but that was brought to its knees even by online dating apps. With the new phone Tobias was able to surf the internet on his mobile. His contract with DeutschlandSIM gave him 1 GB of data every month. Tobias' brother had warned him that he would soon be one of the zombies who stared at their screens for hours on end every single day, but Tobias confidently brushed off that image.

Right now, Google Chrome showed 48 open tabs. Tobias was afraid that the knowledge in the opened tabs would disappear if he closed them; at the same time, the years showed that he didn't read what he intended to read.

The tabs, in the order of the date on which he first opened them, were: the German Wikipedia page on the Marcel Carné film *Port of Shadows*, the German Wikipedia page on the Austrian war criminal, National Socialist, SS and police leader Odilo Globočnik, the English Wikipedia page on the Indian thriller *Aalavandhan*, an article about the moon by Arne Ahlert on [diezukunft.de](http://diezukunft.de) (estimated reading time: 6 minutes), the German Wikipedia page on *Der Orchideengarten*, a German magazine for fantasy and eroticism, the German Wikipedia page on the Austrian trick film artist Erik Jan Hanussen, a Google search for »kenzaburo oe

hiroshima notes pdf,« the German Wikipedia page on the term »Ideologem,« a Google search for »mich weyermann bamberg,« the German Wikipedia page on the Katyn massacre, the German Wikipedia page on the Beslan school siege, the English Wikipedia page on the songwriter and somniloquist Dion McGregor, a Google search for »chiaoscuro« (but what was shown were the search results for the term »chiaroscuro«), the German Wikipedia page on atavism, meaning the recurrence of anatomic characteristics of phylogenetic ancestors and not the sociological term, a Google search for »olfaktorisch,« a Google search for »Kiese Laymon,« the German Wikipedia page on the psychoanalytic term »Oknophilie,« where none of the subheadings had been clicked on, the German Wikipedia page on the Austrian writer Gerhard Roth, the German Wikipedia page on the now obsolete term »Defraudation,« a Google search for »inconnue de la seine,« a Google image search for »gaugin d'où venons nous,« a Google image search for »93 rolex Daytona,« a Google image search for »christine de pizan,« the lyrics of *Was blasen die Trompeten? Husaren heraus!* on volksliederarchiv.de, a webpage with information on the exhibition *René Magritte La Période Vache* on the official website of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, the German Wikipedia page on the Russian entrepreneur Sergei Panteleevich Mavrodi, the German Wikipedia page on the US-American animator, screenwriter and director Frank Tashlin, the German Wikipedia page on the German writer Gisela Elsner, a Google search for »the rustle of spring,« a Google search for »pma,« a Google search for »nebelparder,« a Google search for »pseudolallist,« which got no results but the suggestion for a Wikipedia entry on the persecution of Christians, the German Wikipedia page on the Argentinian journalist and writer Alan Paul, the German Wikipedia page on the Argentinian author Ricardo Piglia, the English Wikipedia page on the Argentinian author and journalist Rodrigo Fresán, a NYT-MAG article entitled »Losing Earth: The Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change,« a thread on table tennis clubs in Beijing on the online platform mytabletennis.net, the English Wikipedia page on the Chinese movie *Crazy Stone*, the German Amazon page of Franziska Gräfin zu Reventlow's *Collected Works: Novels + Stories + Essays + Poems*, the German Amazon page of Byung-Chul Han's *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, the German Federal Foreign Office's travel and safety information on Lesotho, the website of the Hostaria del Monte Croce in Berlin-Kreuzberg, a Google search for »tirzah,« the Suhrkamp/Insel author page of Vladimir Jankélévitch, the English Wikipedia page on the term »Luddite,« which initially described a group of radical British textile workers who destroyed their looms and which then evolved into an antonym of industrialisation, automatization, computerisation and modern technology in general, the German Wikipedia page on the tidal island Lindisfarne in Northumberland, the English Wikipedia page on Japan's oldest fairy tale-

like romantic story, *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*, and Facebook, where someone had invited him to like a page that had the same name as that person.

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Tobias ran from the southern exit of the Babelsberg train station to the tram station. The timing of Potsdam's transport services was such that one usually couldn't make the connection when coming from Berlin, or just barely. It was a Sunday morning and Tobias was hungover. If he missed that tram, he would be twenty minutes late, which would mean that the gallery where he was doing his Voluntary Year of Social Service remained closed. It had snowed in the night. A car was forced to brake hard and honked its horn as Tobias crossed against the red light, sprinting across the road that led to the platform. He slipped on the tracks and fell onto his right hand. A sharp freshness signalled in no uncertain terms that his skin was scratched. The tram doors were closing. Tobias held his injury out to the tram driver beseechingly as blood dripped into his sleeve. He detected movement in the driver's cabin, which could either mean *get out of the way* or *get on in then*. Tobias picked himself up and pushed through the door which was still open a tiny crack. In the tram he examined his injury and removed a few grains of thawing salt that had got partially stuck under his skin. He flinched at every touch. A woman handed him a handkerchief. Not even four hours ago he had staggered home from Golden Gate Club. He thanked her profusely. It was his first winter in Berlin. Exhausted, he drank half a litre of water from his battered *Spreequell* bottle and sank down on one of the hard seats.

There was no one to be seen in front of the Kunstraum Potsdam. Sometimes, if he was late, angry visitors were already waiting for him and pointed out the opening times stated on the internet or on flyers. In this weather there wouldn't be many visitors, Tobias hoped. After cleaning and patching up the wound on his hand somewhat in the bathroom, he sat down at his desk and got his laptop from the backpack. He was worried that it had been damaged by the fall. But the five white rolls he had packed as provisions for the day had softened the impact. He would eat them later with ketchup. Tobias opened the laptop, put on some music, and played a few rounds of Microsoft 3D Pinball. He had intended to keep working on his applications to the creative writing courses in Leipzig and Hildesheim, but his ability to concentrate wasn't quite there yet. He thought about last night and about Alina.

Tobias was in the process of writing a short story about a taxi driver who runs over drunken cyclists at night because he wants to test how little he feels at taking another person's life. The road traffic act agrees with him and over time he becomes a legend and starts a trend

where drunk people stop their bikes in the middle of an intersection at night and wait to have a race with death. Tobias used videos of the running of the bulls in Pamplona for inspiration. The first sentence of the story read *The ecstatic monotonous flashing of the hazard lights seems like a sad attempt to find the rhythm of the darkness* and the last read *God, take your left foot off the pedal*. Tobias had a good feeling about his application.

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After the showing of a theatre production of Igor Bauersima's *norway.today* in the auditorium of the Viktoria Grammar School, Tobias conducted an interview for the school paper *Vicky* that he also wanted to use for the student radio Viktoria FM. He asked the cast and crew how they had approached the subject of suicide, what it felt like to travel from school to school and whether the audiences differed a lot. Using the plural of the German word for audience, *Publika*, made Tobias proud. He didn't ask how it was possible to learn all that text by heart, because the paper's supervising teacher had forbidden him from asking that question. It seemed as though it was a given that theatre people could remember an unlimited amount of text. He recorded the interview and the applause to edit into a short piece for the student radio. Every other month there was a new broadcast that people could listen to on the internet afterwards and the school paper was published quarterly.

The competition between paper and radio was excessively tough, even though the teams of both were nearly identical. Most people who wrote for the school paper also worked for the radio and vice versa. This offered the advantage that the pieces one was working on could easily be used for both. After the radio team's meeting on Tuesday everyone would talk about the paper meeting on Thursday. The resentment did not stem from the pupils but was stoked up by the respective supervisors, who unabashedly badmouthed the other medium without noticing that they were putting down their own team. And so it sometimes happened that the supervisor of the student paper praised one of Tobias' articles (about, for example, the planned purchase of new paddles and table tennis balls for the D basement) to the skies only to then pull the radio piece on the same topic to pieces mercilessly. The kicker was that the students published under their first names on the radio and under their last names in the paper and the two teachers already had to remember so many names that they had become neglectful when it came to the two after school clubs. This enmity, secretly celebrated by the entire school, was supposed to become the subject of a movie made by the documentary film club, which met every Wednesday, but after three meetings they realised that there was no hope whatsoever when it came to this matter.

And they didn't want to waste their energy on something that merely pointed out the wretchedness of life.

Tobias saw the stage set being loaded onto a transporter. He wanted to know where the actors and actresses were.

»Maybe they're having a smoke,« one of the technicians said. And indeed, Tobias found them across the road from the school, drinking coffee at a bar table in front of a kiosk.

»Excuse me, excuse me,« he said breathlessly, »but I do have one more question.«

»Fire away,« one of the actors said.

»I know you might find this silly. But I just have to ask.«

»Yes?« said one of the actresses.

»How do you manage to remember all that text?«

The actor took a drag of his cigarette, his facial expression darkening noticeably.

»You had better go now.«

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