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**Hyaenas**

Thriller

(Original German title: Die Stunde der Hyänen. Thriller)

265 pages, Paperback

Expected publication date: 21 November 2022

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Sample translation by Laura Wagner

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**1** Radek Malarczyk unscrewed the bottle of Rachmaninoff and took a sip. He was sitting in his old VW T2 in a parking bay at the edge of Kreuzberg, not far from the Landwehrkanal. On the other side of the river was Treptow. He was exhausted from wandering the streets. He had been parking his bus here for three weeks, during the day he was out and about, at night he slept wrapped in his sleeping bag on the back seat. No one minded. Others had also parked their camper vans in the bay, but now, in February, Radek was the only one who lived here.

His breakfast and dinner were sitting in a plastic bag. Bread, sausage and cheese, an apple and a banana, he didn't need much. Also his Chesterfield tobacco, filters and papers, as well as two bottles of Rachmaninoff. The inside of the bus smelt like old socks, cold cigarette smoke and leaves, the nights were bitterly cold, but at least he wasn't without shelter.

The Rachmaninoff burned in his throat, it felt good. It had to burn for the memories to stop. That afternoon, Radek had been to visit the white bike on Oberbaum Bridge again. Every day he went to the bike and remembered the accident. It was a busy intersection, no one paid any mind to the white bike, only Radek stood in front of it with trembling hands. He had seen the cyclist too late when he turned the corner. That was six months ago now, but it didn't stop. Radek kept stepping on the brakes, his van stopping with a scrunching sound. The screams of the pedestrians outside, cars honking their horns, he got out and immediately realized what had happened when he saw the bent bicycle underneath the back wheel of his van, the cyclist lying there like a big doll someone had thrown away.

The images wouldn't get out of his head, he could see them sharp and clear in front of his mind's eye, during the day and at night. Every day Radek went to Oberbaum Bridge to atone, knelt down before the white bike and talked to God with a heavy tongue. 'Listen. I didn't see the woman, do you hear me, I didn't see her. Forgive me. Don't leave me alone here. *Zrobię wszystko, co chcesz*. I'll do anything you want.'

God gave him no answer.

Radek got up, unsteady on his feet, he needed a sip of Rachmaninoff in the mornings before coming here. The pedestrians gave him a wide berth. Cyclists raced past him. The outbound lane of Stralauer Allee was full, Thursday afternoon, everyone had to go to the supermarket still, wanting to go home. That was Berlin. Always in a hurry. No place for God. The white bike was chained up at the intersection towards Oberbaum Bridge, it stayed put, for ever and ever. Above him the grey sky and no answer from God. Next to him the cold water of the Spree. Radek remembered his village, the dirt tracks he walked along barefoot as a child. Back then, God had heard him when he prayed together with his grandmother and had fulfilled his childhood wishes. Radek knelt back down in front of the white bike, but God wasn't interested in his drunken begging and pleading.

His throat was dry. When it got dark, he walked back to his van through the park, looking for returnable bottles in the bins along the way. Afterwards, he sat for hours on the back bench, at the camping table, in the dark, rolling a stash of cigarettes and rationing the Rachmaninoff, only small sips at a time, slowly. He was cold to the bone. He had put on three pairs of underwear, two pairs of jeans on top of each other, sweaters, two jackets, a hat, with every sip he got a little warmer. Eventually, the memory of the cyclist faded.

Outside, a local resident walked past with his dog, Radek heard the animal sniffing near the door of his van, a throaty bark. The man called the dog to him. No one complained about him. Radek got weepy, humming an old song. Smoked another cigarette, rolled up in his sleeping bag, turned to the side, fell asleep.

He dreamt of his first winter in Berlin. In the late eighties. The Solidarność years. An icy winter, minus ten, minus twenty degrees, but he was young, alert, always on the go. The cold didn't bother him. He sold stuff on the Polish Market on Potsdamer Platz. The Germans would buy anything, crystal glasses, photographs, jazz records, coffee cups. The old Polish women sat next to him on the hard, frozen ground, their cheeks red from the cold, but business was booming. Those were the days. He was rich then, the wads of money heavy in his trouser pockets. Every week he went back and forth two, three times, between Warsaw and West Berlin, delivering goods for the market, taking fellow countrymen back home. He sang as he

drove, walked through winter with a rolling gait, his shirt unbuttoned underneath the leather coat, he wasn't cold.

The dream ended abruptly, Radek woke with a start, back lying in his smelly van, opened his eyes wide, gasping for air, the van was full of smoke, every breath was bitter. There was a fire somewhere, he couldn't see where it was, but he could feel the swirling heat. He thrashed around, panicked, trying to get out of the tight sleeping bag, rattling the bottles at his feet, the remaining vodka spilt. A piercing pain shot through his back, it didn't matter right now, he had to get out of here. Immediately. He tore the sleeping bag off his legs, looking for his shoes, feeling for the door handle.

Suddenly, the entire interior was ablaze, the air seemed to burn. Radek closed his eyes, put an arm in front of his face while trying to find the door with his other hand. Getting out was all that mattered, out to the pavement. His old newspapers caught fire, he could hear the flames lapping, he brushed them away, reached into the blaze and smelt the burnt flesh, his flesh, didn't feel any pain yet but thought of the fuel tank underneath him, it could blow up at any moment, that would be the end of him.

His hand found the handle and flung open the door. The cool night air hit him. Radek exhaled. He stumbled outside, his feet still tangled up in the sleeping bag. He stumbled out of the van and onto the pavement and rolled around on the wet ground to smother the flames. He was wearing three layers of clothing to ward off the cold, now warm sweat was running down his back.

He got to his feet and staggered on the pavement. Flames shot up high above the car.

In the shadows of the gateway of the last house across the street, twenty metres away from him, he saw a man who seemed to be shaking violently. Radek walked towards him, needing help himself, he was already raising his injured hands but then took a closer look at the man. His coat was open, as was his fly, the young man was staring at the raging fire engulfing the van, rubbing his pale protruding cock like a man possessed. He paid no attention to Radek, he was caught in his own world of lust and shame and the heat of the moment. His movements became faster and faster, his body clenched. The young man gasped several times and threw his head back as his seed shot out.

'*Chuj!* What are you doing?' Radek said. He didn't recognize his own voice. 'Are you crazy? Sod off. Have you no respect?'

The young man startled. His face was skinny, his breath still coming in bursts. His eyes stood close together, dark and still. He gave no answer, hastily pulled up his trousers, put away his cock, closed his coat over it and pushed off from the gateway.

‘Wait,’ Radek said and raised his hand. ‘Stop! *Idioto!*’

The young guy flinched away from the man, whose hair and eyebrows were singed, whose skin had peeled off his forehead and nose, whose clothing was smouldering and who swore at him in Polish. He walked towards him with his hands stretched out. Behind him the orange reflection of the tall flames of the burning van. The young man ran off into the darkness, clumsily, both hands holding onto his slipping trousers. He turned the corner, was gone. Radek felt the pain setting in with full force now. His hair was burnt, his whole face felt like a hot mask. His hands were naked and unprotected. How badly he needed half a bottle of Rachmaninoff now to extinguish the pain. Fighting fire with fire. Lights came on in the flats above the gateway, a woman flung her window open and screamed. Radek turned around to his van, thinking about his bags with the food, the two bottles of Rachmaninoff. What a waste. The inside of the van was ablaze, nothing could be saved. His hands were trembling with pain and longing, he was yearning for a sip.

It took the fire brigade no more than three minutes to arrive with two units, six men in full gear. Four of them shot water and foam into the flames, two came towards him kneeling on the cobblestone pavement, holding out his aching hands in front of him.

‘Were you in the car? Was anyone else in it? Are you in pain?’

Radek nodded. ‘Was the only one, fell asleep, suddenly there was fire,’ he said. ‘I’m in pain.’ He made to get up.

‘Lie down!’

One paramedic cut the sleeves of his jacket, another the trouser legs, Radek could feel the cool metal of the scissors on his skin. The firemen unfolded a golden thermal blanket over him. They knew exactly what to do, working with practised movements, it was routine for them, but a solemn mood gripped Radek. He was a person again. Not a bum who had killed a woman in a car accident but a person with pain that needed to be taken care of.

‘Can you breathe normally?’

‘Yes,’ said Radek. ‘I think so.’

‘What day is it?’

‘It’s my birthday,’ Radek said. ‘February 10.’

‘Congratulations,’ said the fireman. ‘You have survived, just. Someone has given you the gift of life one more time.’

Radek lay on the pavement and looked up, a group of spectators surrounded him, the firemen, paramedics, neighbours, above their heads the naked branches of the trees lining the street and behind those the cold distant sky, the waning sickle of the moon. God was looking

at him, finally God had heard him. At that moment, Radek knew that he would stop drinking. For good. Not a single drop.

The police arrived, uniformed officers, detectives. They were waiting for an ambulance to take Radek to the nearest hospital.

‘Looks like arson to me,’ said a fireman next to him. ‘At first glance, but I’m quite sure. Forensics will be here soon. Maybe a targeted attack, attempted murder. Do you have any enemies?’

Underneath the golden blanket, Radek was shaking from the pain, but still he smiled. ‘Enemies? Boss threw me out after the accident, Irina threw me out for drinking, same with my colleague Henryk. But enemies? I live by myself.’

‘You were living in that van there?’ a police officer asked.

Radek nodded.

‘I need to take down your details.’

Radek told him his name and pointed at the smoking van. ‘ID, passport, insurance – all in there.’

Finally, the ambulance arrived, the paramedics lifted him onto a carrier, pushed him into the vehicle. The fire brigade left, the renters went back into their houses, the night was cold.

Forensics were examining the van for burn marks to determine the origin and spread of the fire. But there wasn’t much for the experts to find. A light rain set in and erased the evidence.

**2** Jette Geppert heard the police and fire brigade sirens moving out to an incident

near the Landwehrkanal late at night. She was sitting in her kitchen five blocks from there, drinking wine with Laszlo.

She had been living in the communal living project in Forster Strasse 17 for five years. The house was built in the Amsterdam School style, its façade rendered in red and white, the entrance and gateway painted a dark green. In the eighties, a group of students had renovated the run-down house from the ground up, tearing out the rotten floors and laying new ones, putting in new windows, installing new pipes. They had lived on the construction site for years as they made the house habitable again bit by bit. That was a long time ago now, but the weekly plenum that all the residents were obligated to attend had survived. They would discuss suggestions made by the energy committee until late at night, talk about when the façade had to be done, who would take care of the boilers in the basement, who would mop the stairs in the front building. The pioneer generation had been at odds for years, the mood at the plenary assembly was testy. Jette and the other newcomers were constantly reproached for not contributing enough. They profited from the cheap rent, which was not even half of what it would be on the free market, where nothing could be found anyway. Jette loved her huge, strangely cut flat, which had once been a feminist flat share. Theirs had been the poster of the spotted hyaenas that hung in her kitchen. Hyaenas were considered sneaky and cowardly, she had read in Brehm's animal book, their laughter hoarse and derisive, but Jette liked the poster.

Three of Laszlo's moving boxes sat next to the fridge, still unpacked. He had moved in two weeks ago, Jette had said yes, just like that, when he had asked her. Yes, she wanted him to live with her. She wanted to wake up next to him, have breakfast with him, hug him before she left for the office, lie down next to him on the couch when she got back. She wanted to sleep next to this big, warm body whose strength and warmth fascinated her. Laszlo was amazing in bed, because he was able to let go, every night he taught her what lust could be. They had met four weeks ago playing pool, Jette was more in love than she had ever been before.

Today she was tired, coming from a long meeting between editorial board and management, the finances weren't great, the newspaper had to save money. No ad sales were coming in, subscribers were cancelling or dying. On her laptop were two longer pieces that she still had to finish, and Laszlo hadn't done any shopping, although he had been at home all day.

'Why should I buy bread?' he said, equally irritated. 'I was writing. Don't you have that great cafeteria there? Why don't you eat there?'

‘I had a salad there at lunch,’ she said. ‘It’s eleven o’clock at night now. We don’t have so much as cheese in the fridge.’

‘If you’d come home earlier, we could have ordered something,’ he said.

‘I had a lot to do,’ Jette said and emptied her glass. ‘I’m really starving. Didn’t I buy some crisps?’

‘I had them for lunch,’ he said. ‘I was so caught up with my writing that I didn’t want to leave to go to the supermarket. That totally messes up my flow.’

Laszlo wrote, every day. Jette admired him for that. He wrote manuscript after manuscript. Novels, stories, plays, movie pitches. He had never published anything, except for two texts in anthologies. He had never sold anything. It didn’t matter, she thought. He would make it if he kept at it.

‘Also, I didn’t have any money,’ he said. ‘There was nothing here, and I don’t have anything at the moment. I don’t get an advance, no royalties, I have to pay for everything up front myself.’

‘You can ask me, if you need money,’ Jette said, relieved that she understood what annoyed him a little better. ‘I’ll lend you some. If you go shopping for the two of us, I can give you an allowance for that, I think that’s fair.’

‘I don’t think that’s fair,’ Laszlo said. ‘I hate being kept by a woman. Allowance, my arse. Are you making fun of me?’

‘Well, you could always write for *Checkpoint*,’ said Jette. She didn’t want to argue endlessly right now, she wanted something to eat. ‘They’re looking for people who can write. They don’t pay much, but they pay something at least. We talked about it at the meeting today, that they’re still looking for people. The job’s really simple: research events, put together short texts, crunchy title. If the students can do it, so can you. You’ll just have to get up early.’

Laszlo scrutinized her for a long time, his arm on the manuscript he was currently working on. She was never allowed to read what he was writing.

‘Don’t you get it?’ he said. ‘Or don’t you want to get it? You won’t accept that I’m an author. An author, not a hack for senior centres at Urania. Your newspaper brain just can’t handle that.’

‘Sheesh,’ she said. ‘What is up with you? Get a grip. It was a suggestion, nothing more. A suggestion on how you could make some money instead of sitting here whining.’

‘Who is it that’s whining here?’ Laszlo said, his face rigid with anger. ‘I’m whining? You’re taking your shitty mood out on me because you’re on your fucking period.’

That was the end of conversation where Jette was concerned.

‘Do what you want,’ she said. ‘I’ll go get a kebab somewhere. Forget about *Checkpoint*, I don’t care. I just thought that it’d be nice if you published something for once. Might be a while ‘til they give you that Büchner prize.’

Laszlo got up and slapped her across the face.

At first, she didn’t understand what had just happened, the pain took a few seconds to register. Laszlo’s face was right in front of hers, his expression a little distorted, determined. He knew what he was doing. His hand came towards her, she didn’t turn away. No man had ever hit her, not even her father. It hurt.

‘Do what you want,’ Laszlo said and went into the bathroom.

That night, they didn’t speak another word. Jette didn’t end up going out, she found half a packet of crispbread and ate it with old fresh cheese and had three glasses of wine as tears ran down her face.

Afterwards, she lay on the couch, wide awake, heard Laszlo snore in her bed in the other room and the cars on the cobblestones of Reichenberger Street outside, the sound piercing her head. She couldn’t sleep because she was hungry and because she could still feel Laszlo’s hand striking her face. It was large, powerful, he had got her good, from her temple down to her jaw. Her eye felt swollen, like after a wasp sting. She longed for a cigarette.

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