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Tao

Novel

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When my father's father died, they told him his father would now be sitting high above on the craggy edge of the moon looking down, watching him; and should he ever be alone and desperate he need only wait for darkness, for the milky gold stone to float over the palms and power lines, and then he could be sure those paternal eyes would rest upon him, expectantly. I can imagine how my father, a child in white mourning garments, looked out the window to the night sky, reliably cloudless, at least during the dry season, a shard of moon almost always visible.

But here it is cloudy. It's drizzling. I'm cold. I'm drunk. The expensive wine that I'd been given years ago, that I'd saved for a special occasion—I never would have guessed I'd be drinking it out of the bottle. In front of me, the Rhein is a black surface, indifferent, unlit, weeds left and right of me. Behind me freight trains squeal. There's a strong stench, probably a sewage plant.

A yellow half circle is beneath the super's nose, the mark left where his grey beard filters cigarette smoke. His hand is wide and strong and warm, as he gives me the once over with curious eyes.

Well, c'mon up, he says, even though we have to stand where we are to let a dozen girls and a woman and her trolley pass. Behind him cars accelerate, then a van, a garbage truck. Finally, we can move from the outside edge of the sidewalk to the row of buildings between a DM drugstore and the Pizza-Döner-Center Kalk. The super opens a door. Next to it is a doorbell panel and mailboxes. Advertisement papers shrink-wrapped in plastic stick out of their slots. The stairwell is tiled mint-green, as are the steps. The first floor has a window that looks out over a flat graveled roof with a parking lot behind it.

You can shop there, he says.

Only now do I realize it's an Aldi opening out onto a parallel street.

In the one room of the apartment it smells of plastic. It's not small, but not spacious, either. Many halogen lights are embedded in the low ceiling. It's an old office. Linoleum is arranged in a dark parquet design.

I open a window. Above the noise of motors rises the glass façade of an old shipping center. Behind it, laborers transport pressboard and equipment.

It's not so bad, the super says, putting down his clipboard. *It's just being gutted. They're putting in a Kaufland. Then you'll also be able to shop there.*

I nod. A doorless passage leads to a windowless kitchen. I try the light switch, but nothing happens.

Oh yeah, the super says, rubbing his belly. *The power's out. The last tenant didn't pay. Anyway, you can have the kitchen as is.*

He points to cabinets that were once white. A stove hood leans against a wall, a Jägermeister refrigerator with a glass door is in the corner, the stove is missing knobs, the oven has no door. He stares at me with one eye, speechless.

Miriam now tries to be in the apartment as little as possible. When I come home, the rooms are empty. From a tossed kitchen towel, a new layer of clothes in the laundry bin, or the waxing and waning refrigerator inventory, I realize she must have been home. At night, I sometimes hear the door, the creaking floorboards, the flushed toilet.

By morning, she's already gone. She leaves a laptop-shaped space on her desk surrounded by loose notepads, opened letters, and books. I assume she works in the library, though she's always hated it there—the skittish first-years who prattle on in whispers about mock exams, thinking no one can hear them, right alongside pensioners who can't or don't want to pay their subscriptions anymore and who now gather every morning at the newspaper rack to argue over the *Stadtanzeiger* or the *Rundschau*, and who always breathe loudly and turn every page with much rustling, only to smooth it down and then fluff it back up again. Then there are the aging superannuated students with balding heads who stalk the female Master's candidates.

The rooms sound empty under my feet. There's only one shelf left.

When it's over, my arms hurt, my clothes stick to my skin, and I'm breathing hard, leaning against the open car. A lamp towers over boxes, its shade crooked. In Kalk, I'm too tired to unload, so I take my backpack from the passenger seat, open the back door, and pull out the sleeping bag and mat from between chair legs. Something slips inside and crashes against the car's wood trim. My clothes are in blue garbage bags, and I grab a T-shirt and boxer shorts before locking the car. Men sit on a wall drinking liquor and look at me as I walk past them over the Aldi parking lot.

It still stinks of plastic in the apartment, and a dull light from the streetlamps falls in. I open a window and hear voices on the street.

Amir! someone calls. And again, *Amir!*, *Amir!* But Amir doesn't want to listen and walks stoically down the street. From his gait I think I can recognize the argument he's just turned his back to.

I look at my phone. Four missed calls, along with messages on different services that I don't feel like reading. Maybe Miriam has started to tell our friends, and they're all concerned now, worried that I've already taken a wrong turn. I turn off my phone, and the light display fades, leaving the room as if blackened. Only gradually do my eyes get used to the half-lit space. The walls seem narrower now than during the day. I smoke and wonder when I'll have electricity. I hear *Amir!* again, this time it's a woman's voice. I look outside. Amir is gone.

Micha writes: Hey, you all right?

I write: Miriam broke up with me

Micha: Fuck

Micha writes: Toby, I'm really sorry

Micha writes: If you need somebody to talk to, call me

I write: I'm on the bus right now. Idea for a band name: The Crying in Public. First album: Trying Not To

Micha writes: Haha

It's raining. I look out the train window, watch the low clouds flung low over the ground, stretching out tiny fingers as if to hold fast to it. Beneath the clouds, bright rain jackets with leashed dogs, now and then a solitary car groping through the twilight.

There's a magazine on the seat in front of me, and on its reverse side is an ad for a hotel chain—a pool and bungalows framed by bamboo and banana trees, stone sculptures decorated with flowers, a strange tortuous tree trunk with giant leaves, vines. Over this scene, a stylized script: *Endless Exploitation*. I'm puzzled, but see I've read it wrong, that it actually reads: *Endless Exploration*.

Beyond Mannheim, mountains rise out of the ground.

Hiking in the Black Forest. Mother and Uncle Winfried talk about illness and death. Uncle Winfried's shirt is open. He's lost a lot of weight. Bony and pale, he plods through the grass. His gray hair falls to his shoulders. He eats plants from the edge of the path: stinging nettle seeds, blackberries, and tiny forest strawberries. He's wary of only mushrooms.

We look down on the valleys from above.

Grandpa died over there, mother says at some point, gesturing to a hillside. You can't make out the crater anymore.

Overgrown, says Uncle Winfried, then keeps walking, picking something from a tree.

Micha sends a new text, and I read it on my phone. It's about somebody named Tomi who wants to become an author. He's half Chinese, but most people can't see it, and sometimes he forgets, too.

I write to Micha: So I'm Tomi, right?

Micha writes: Nah.

Micha writes: Ok, maybe a little.

Micha writes, but no message shows, only the pulsing gray dots, appearing, disappearing, appearing. I turn off the screen and go out to the balcony. It's still cool, and behind the mountains day is breaking, tentative contours on the flat land. My phone vibrates again.

Are you angry now?

I hear my mother leave the bedroom and stand, then the bathroom door, then music. I put on my shoes and go out. The toy stores and sports outlets lining the narrow streets leading to the center of the city haven't opened yet, though lights are on and employees are moving around inside. The displays that usually border the sidewalks block the aisles. The kebab spit is already turning at the Turkish café. There's nobody inside, and where shredded lettuce, cabbage, tomatoes, and cucumbers usually rest are only empty mounts for the

stainless steel trays.

There's a Kaiser bakery below the church, and I buy two baguettes, a pretzel bread stick, and a spelt loaf. On the way back I see patients from the health resort. You can recognize them by their crutches and the large bandages on their faces, or the relatives who guide them by the elbow across the street.

Then I'm sitting opposite my mother who says I should go somewhere, take a vacation. I nod, place my coffee next to my plate.

Go anywhere, just to clear your head.

Yes, I say and cut my baguette in two.

To see sun. To the sea.

Hm, I say and put cheese inside.

Two weeks, three.

We'll see, I answer and take a bite.

The South of France, she says.

I chew and try to swallow.

When I visited Miriam for the first time in Marseille, they pulled me out of the car. They hit me only once in the face. They probably knew that would be enough. It wasn't actually so bad. My old Mazda wouldn't have passed inspection, and I'd spent most of my cash on gas. What hurt was losing my Discman, which was attached to the stereo by an adapter cassette, losing my CD spindle in the glove compartment where I carried most of my burnt music, losing my handsome edition of Gustav Schwab's works, which I'd just purchased at a flea market in Stühlinger, losing my Adidas tracksuit jacket that was orange and that I wore a lot, even though it was already really old. I was also sorry to have lost T-shirts and underwear and jeans that I'd have to buy new now, and the suitcase I'd borrowed from my mother, and the Junot Díaz novel I'd purchased for Miriam, a nice paperback edition that

I'd read in such a way that I'd opened it just enough so it would look brand new.

Oh, no, said Miriam. She stood in the doorway and had to touch my face to make sure nothing was loose. It hurt when her fingers passed right over the swelling. She looked me over intently, even though I said again and again that I was okay. She finally let me into the apartment. It smelled of the ratatouille she makes that I really liked. Wineglasses stood on the kitchen table. She led me to a chair and wrapped ice in a dishtowel, the cordless phone wedged between her ear and shoulder. Only after the police officers had left was I able to pull her to me and ask if she'd finally give me a kiss.

Tao, chéri, she said.

By way of farewell, my mother wants to tell me something.

You know, she begins. But then a freight train thunders into the station, right in front of us, containers and tank cars. We turn because the head wind lashes our faces. It finally passes.

You know, she starts again, but now there's an announcement for the regional train. The loudspeaker is a loud and strident scratch. In the end, my mother can only wave as I heave my suitcase onto the train. The door is already cheeping as I turn to her. The railcar rolls forward, and I'm gone.

On Monday, I'm sitting in the office, and a student auditor is screaming at me. I wait for him to finish and then continue filling out forms. He comes back, stands unsure in the room, finds his jute bag on my colleague's table, where he'd left it in his unthinking excitement. He grabs it, even looks inside, as though wanting to make sure nothing had been slipped in or out. I watch him from the corner of my eye, as he, still trembling, finally lets his stupid bag drop to his side. I put a stamp under my signature and blow the ink dry, lay the document onto the copier's glass surface and turn it on. It whirrs, and when I look up the auditor has slunk out the door.

Miriam's father died when she was twenty-three and I was twenty-four. Pale as a sheet of paper, she sat in a deep leather chair. I sat on a narrow bed. I tried not to move so as not to make the metal frame squeak. Twice I tried to get closer to her, twice she lifted her hand

to keep me away. It was icy cold in the room, though we'd stuffed a blanket in the gaps of a French window and the sun was shining again, pressing itself through the dirty glass, laying itself down on the beautiful old tiles, the oversized wardrobe, and the drywall that divided the huge parlor. From the street we heard the call of the fruit sellers, the rattling of the motor scooters. Only once Laurence, the flatmate next door, had begun to telephone with her mother—about her Twingo that had broken down, *putain de voiture*—only then did Miriam begin to run the back of her hand over her face, silently. Later, she sent me out to buy wine or liquor. I wandered around the SPAR a long time, up and down aisles, staring a long time at the shelf of spirits, until finally I was able to pull out a bottle of Pernod.

When I returned, Miriam had already packed her bag and called a taxi. I was at a loss and stood in the door. She gave me the keys. I wanted to say something, but she laid her hand on my chest and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

When I read her text, I was pretty drunk, the Pernod bottle half empty. She was sorry, she had to now...she couldn't now... she'd be in touch...and then:

See you soon, Tobi. Kiss, M.

It's really nice, Micha says, turning around. I follow his gaze: gray sheets, the bed frame, very simple and made of light wood. The old desk at the window has a tangle of cords on it, memory cards, the camera, my notebook filled with the scribbles of the past days, a laptop. The bookshelf is still divided into its component parts, the moving boxes piled into narrow ramparts. Vacuum cleaner. The lamp and its crooked shade.

Really nice, Micha says again. He pulls beers out of his backpack and hands me one. It's cold and probably from the kiosk next to the O2 shop on the corner. He nods and tries to smile. We smoke out the window.

I've got to tell him eventually. Micha's never hugged me. He's pretty fat and very soft, and I'd always thought that if Micha ever hugged me it would maybe be unpleasant for me. But it wasn't at all. It was nice, and he pressed me close to him until I'd calmed down.

Look at that, he says eventually and points to the old shopping center. There's still a

mannequin on the top floor between pressboard and rolls of cable—a silhouette in the dimness. As it gets brighter, we recognize the forest-green upper half; below, the doll is naked. She stands there abandoned, looking down a desolate passage to where the elevators don't run anymore.

Laurence gave me three old T-shirts and some underwear that had belonged to her ex-boyfriend. I purchased two pairs of cheap jeans and blank CDs on the Marché du Prado. Miriam burned all her music for me. As the disc drive flashed, we slept together or went to the park, listened to Portishead or Charlotte Gainsbourg. Sometimes she had to go to the university, so then I'd read her books or go to the SPAR at the end of the street and shop for food. I didn't see much of Marseille. I didn't care. In Saint-Charles, a street vendor offered me a Panasonic Discman. It was the same model I'd owned. Laurence said later that, actually, it was probably my old one. That night, I turned on the desk lamp and examined the device, looked over its wear and tear, the small scratches and dents in its plastic casing. Laurence might be right, I thought.

I go on vacation in a rented car, and at 180 kilometers the steering wheel starts to wobble. The wind pushes the tiny Corsa now to the left, now to the right, as though it sought protection in the guardrails. A red Porsche with garish LED lights lets me pass to avoid an accident. That's just the way it has to be. I overtake black limousines and check out the chauffeurs with their white shirts and starched collars. Sometimes they look back at me, empty gazes. I can't read their faces.

All at once, a downpour. Deep puddles on the road, the steering system like wax. The Corsa doesn't react anymore. It slides lethargically forward until the tire treads catch again and I can steer the car jerkily back into the lane. Only once a lot of time passed, only once I look into my rearview mirror three times to see cars behind me forming an unchanging line, only then am I terrified of the accident that didn't happen.

In Cuxhaven there's a pier called Old Love. It's decayed and smelly. All around are fish restaurants. I eat at Burger King and then wander around until I find a hotel. It's dark by the time I've checked in. Beyond the dyke, the sea is a black line with brightly lit cruise ships on top. The wicker beach chairs are locked up with boards protruding from the front

seats like underlips. They are scattered along the beach, but never solitary, small packs of brooding sand furniture.

I go down to the beach, and where the black starts, where I think the water is, nothing moves. I assume it's low tide, but it's creepy, and I don't move any closer, as though the black might rise out of its bed and drag me in, and nobody would know what's happened to me. They'd find my rental car at the hotel parking lot, my quickly scribbled registration form at the reception desk. Maybe the person working the cash register at Burger King would remember me, maybe not. The wind whistles over my bottle, and I try to angle it away, but it always finds a new corner from which to draw dark sounds into my beer.

Only Miriam called me Tao—when we were alone and naked, or just before kisses that were serious and meaningful, not casual. Otherwise, she called me Tobi, as did everyone else.

Only a few people know I'm actually called Tao. At Miriam's sister Alice's wedding, we sat between cousins whose names I've already forgotten. A drunk Viennese woman beside us—a patent lawyer with whom Alice had once worked, but only later did we learn that—was slumped in her chair. Then she snapped forward and stared silently into my face a while.

Where are you from? she asked.

Köln, I said.

Naah, she said, with a dismissive gesture. *Where are you actually from?*

Oh. Freiburg.

She kept on with her penetrating stare.

And your parents?

Same, I said.

Oh, come off it, she cried, annoyed, stretching herself across half the table to take a swig

from her wine glass.

You know, I've got a really good friend...Tam, and Tam is from Vietnam, and that's really interesting, and I'm just really interested in this sort of thing, and that's why I'm asking, because it's so fascinating where people are from.

Ah, I answer. Vietnam is definitely interesting, but I don't know it that well.

The drunk woman continued, *Mother or father? Because you're not completely something else, just half, right?*

Miriam stood next to me now. She'd jumped out of her chair and it crashed to the floor.

Come, she said. Come.

We went to the buffet and ate finger food.

My friend, Tam, Miriam aped, pulling a face. I had to laugh, and by accident spit a piece of cheese into my glass.

Off to the side, some animal is digging around in the mud, finds something, bites into it, barfs, keeps digging.

I collect dirty laundry off the carpet, shove it into a plastic bag from Lidl, open the suitcase. My phone vibrates.

Micha writes: Hey, Tobi, I'm in a café and am reworking my text. Tomi is now Yán and decides in the course of the story against a literary career. He stays at university and graduates with a thesis on the apocalypse and Carl Schmitt. So, the character has some of your traits, but not much else.

I write: Okay.

With one knee on my suitcase, I tug at the zipper.

When I tongued Miriam and she came—just staring at the ceiling, always up, as though she pulled everything from there, her stomach muscles tightening, her breath flattening out

into short bursts—I made myself come between her legs.

It's different on Rügen, deep blue hemmed in by green, sailboats, camper vans lumbering along the streets. It's almost warm, scent of woodsmoke, and atop the chalk cliffs is my hotel. It's old, with threadbare carpets. The minibar was ripped out of the cabinet. Otherwise, it's very clean. From the terrace, a panorama: offshore wind farm, ships, a lighthouse, a bluff, and, where its edge collapses, scree.

Did it bring us closer together, Miriam and me, that our fathers were dead? Or did it put more distance between us, instead, as though dead fathers were a contagious disease? Maybe she secretly blamed me, even knowing that this made no sense. But you can't keep every kind of nonsense at bay. And there was always the mourning she retreated into.

I watch a woman on the beach, red robe, perm, towel in her left hand. She stands still, looking out to sea, as though something were moving out there, but nothing is. The Baltic Sea lies spread out like death. Only after a while do I make out a bald head with arms next to it, reaching out of the water and slicing back in. Eventually, a man wades onto land. He's naked and looks over to me, then to his wife. She hands him his towel, and he dries off.

Miriam and I are at Lago di Bolsena, our solitary tent pitched on a field and a few meters from shore. I think this was our first trip together. At night, I woke up, the sleeping mat next to me empty, the mosquito mesh pulled down to the ground. I went out. Miriam stood unsettled in the dark. She said she'd heard something, something had fallen into the water, or someone. I looked out over the lake, where I could hardly make out a thing, the sky barely brighter than the water. I saw nothing, heard nothing except the quiet rushing of the highway that drifted over to us from the other side. Finally, I said it was probably an animal, a bird, maybe even a fish, slapping its tail hard on the water, who knows. Miriam didn't want to believe me, not until I suggested maybe she'd just been dreaming. I led her back to the tent, zipped the mosquito mesh closed behind us and pulled her to me. It took a while for us to fall asleep again.

The next morning, a man in flip-flops, a barefoot girl, and, a bit farther back, a woman in shorts and a crop top approach. We hadn't seen them before. They must have rented one

of the bungalows at the other end of the grounds near the showers. I was making coffee on the gas stove, and Miriam was getting out of the lake, rubbing water from her eyes.

Paula! they called. *Paula!*

The father was hoarse, almost barking. The girl, on the other hand, called out in a wavering sing-song: *Paula!* The mother was silent. Only once she was near us did we hear her voice. She asked if we'd seen their dog Paula, about this big, pointing to her right knee; on her left knee she had a bruise. The dog had white fur, a terrier. I shook my head. The woman looked at my coffee maker, which had started to bubble, and I set to work on the gas stove. They kept going. I reached a cup over to Miriam, but she kept her arms at her side and looked at me. Only then did I understand.

Micha writes to me. WDR is producing his radio play. I open the link to the file he sent to me. I think Yán comes off to me as a bit whiny, and the narrator as affected.

I write: I think Yán is a bit whiny. Haha.

Micha writes: Haha. Yes.

I met Miriam's father twice. The second time, his face was pale in the deepening twilight pressing through the church windows. After the service, we gathered at Miriam's half-sister, whom I hadn't met before. Her half-brother was called Max and was only a bit younger than Miriam. He had ear studs and looked a lot like Ronaldo. The half-sister was named Jennifer, maybe fourteen or fifteen and with bad teeth. Standing apart from us was Miriam's mother, left arm around her belly, the right elbow resting on the left hand. She smoked and watched as Alice, Miriam, and I reached out our hands to Max and Jennifer in turn. She observed this scene, almost curious, and I wonder sometimes what she was thinking, if it made sense to her that the half-siblings now stood together, somewhat stiff and uncertain, it's true, but still grieving together for their disloyal progenitor who was now beneath the earth.

I travel through Wrocław and Vienna to Zagreb. There's a pianola in the hotel lobby, a handsome grand piano, that's playing Debussy, just for the receptionist and me. He's busy

with my credit card because the scanner isn't working. I sit on the pianola bench and lay my fingers on the black and white keys that are pulled down beneath them and into the case. They spring back up, down, and up again. A Chinese group enters, and I allow my hands to follow the playing pianola. I even rock my upper body and look once dreamily at the ceiling. They fall silent and watch me. The oldest one starts filming. Once they disappear into the elevator, the receptionist grins at me. He's got fixed braces.

Upstairs, I throw myself on the bed and turn on the TV. "Inspector Rex" is playing, dubbed into Croatian. The dog jumps through a windowpane. There's screaming, a gun fires, Richard Moser runs up the stairs. It's exciting, even though I don't understand the dialogue. At times, I feel I can read Tobias Moretti's lips and those of the supporting actors, despite the faintly burnished Croatian voices that continually lay themselves down over the images.

At night, I awake, unwashed, confused, naked women loll about in a field. Drunk on sleep, I stagger into the bathroom.

The dog turned up later. We could see the family walking with it. The girl held the leash.

You see? I said to Miriam. I tried not to show my relief. If it worked, I don't know. Miriam often tried to conceal that she'd actually seen right through me, and then when I realized she was concealing this, I tried to conceal that I'd noticed her concealment. Whether she also noticed I was doing that, I don't know.

I drive in the direction of Split along the Bosnian coast. Only on the ferry to Bari do I realize that I've left my suitcase in Zagreb, in the hotel's baggage storage. I imagine it standing there in the dusky interior, light falling through the crack of the door, the shadow of the receptionist occasionally flitting past, but otherwise abandoned, alone, surrounded and stared at by strange travel bags and trolleys.

At the harbor, a gull shits on my right sandal. It stinks and sticks.