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The Good and The Dead

Thriller

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pp. 7 – 23

Nihal

Nihal wakes up before Jamie manages to find the lock with his key. As usual, he has a party bitch stuck to him. Her voice echoes through the stairwell. Nihal can't make out the words, but it definitely sounds like: Oh, Jamie, you are so funny, why don't you fuck me right here on the landing? You could use her laugh to chase foxes from their dens.

When the lock is finally found and the door swings open, her voice rings shrilly in the flat.

— I was starting to think it was the wrong door.

She seems to find that funny, laughs hysterically. Until Jamie says to her:

— Shut up for a moment, will you. You're going to wake up my sister.

As if Nihal could possibly be asleep after this entrance.

— You live with your sister?

— That's what I just said.

— Is she as hot as you?

— You talk too much.

— That's what my boyfriend always says too.

Again, that laugh. Amazing the things this woman finds funny.

— He's right, Jamie says. Not that door, that's my sister's room.

— I'd like to meet her.

— No, you wouldn't. In here.

Nihal flicks on the lamp next to her bed and wastes a pointless minute on thinking about how it's possible that so many women are just gagging to be used. Enjoying their own humiliation? She turns on her back and stares at the woodchip wallpaper. Her first own flat, 52 square metres, two bedrooms. Built in the sixties, low ceilings, horrendously soundproofed, building materials that'd make you want to run for the hills. Even the front door is so thin that Nihal could easily punch a hole in it with a straight left hook. And when old Doganay on the fourth floor goes to use the toilet at night she can hear the water rushing through the wall next to her head. She doesn't care about any of it, the main thing was that it was hers. She punches with her left hand, by the way. Shoots with her left, punches with her left, but writes with her right.

The moaning starts up in Jamie's room, of course it does, at half past four in the morning. On Nihal's day off. She hits the wall with her fist.

— Moan quietly, this is not a porno!

The woman snorts with laughter. Nihal hears her say:

— I don't think I'd like to meet your sisters after all.

— Told you.

At least Nihal slowed her down for a little bit. She wastes two more minutes on useless thoughts: that the walls are too thin to have a flat mate. That she thought she was doing something nice for her little brother when she let him move in with her, temporarily. Should've known better. Knew better. Just didn't want to admit it to herself. And that's what annoys her most of all.

Gretchen comes, hallelujah, squeals like there's a teddy bear to be won, and has the orgasm of her life. Nihal's first own flat. Fuck that. Things get quiet on the other side of the wall. She turns off the lamp. Arms next to her body, palms up. Breathe. Feel. The neck, relax the neck. That's always where it starts, the headache, the migraine. Focus on your breathing.

Slowly, Nihal has meditated herself back to the brink of sleep – her neck relaxed, her breathing even – when the moaning picks up again. Doesn't sound like the woman is being used, more like she was using Jamie. Maybe the question of why so many women like to be used is wrong. Maybe the real question is why so many women are keen on being treated badly.

Nihal makes a promise to herself: end of the month. By then, Jamie will be gone. Otherwise, she'll change the locks. Well, she should change the locks anyway.

Before Jamie's squeaky duck can moan out her second orgasm, Nihal is out of bed, has put on her black full-body suit, fastened the laces of her running shoes, strapped the iPhone to her upper arm, grabbed the keys and pulled the door shut behind her.

In Nihal's experience, there is very little a ten-k run can't help with: neighbours who let their dog shit right outside your door, arsehole macho colleagues, the account balance at the end of the month, the feeling of not being enough, headaches. She bounces down the steps quickly in threes – left-right-left, right-left-right – begins her training before she has even left the house.

The cool night air is like a gentle slap in the face, Nihal is switched on immediately. Her usual round takes her around Litzensee twice, eleven kilometres, but the path is unlit in parts and the last thing Nihal needs rights now is to trip over the root of a tree and sprain her ankle. So she heads towards the district court building, through the *Kiez*. The city is still asleep and the air hasn't been breathed in three times and pressed through engines yet. Even on Kantstraße there is so little traffic that she could run on the street. Which she does, takes up space, puts on a quick burst of speed and feels her lungs expanding. Fuck you, Jamie. You'll be out by the end of the month.

Saad

The supply room behind the porter's hut is a windowless, three by three metre concrete cell, bundles of cables as thick as an arm disappear into its ceiling. A greenish metal cabinet that gives off a sickly hum is hung on the right wall. There is a drain grate in the floor in the centre of the room, which Saad has covered with gaffer tape because every time it rains the sewer smell is pressed in through it.

He stops and stands in the doorway for a moment. Seeing Leila sleeping in her little bed, underneath the canopy while the sun, the moon and stars dance across the walls is a small miracle every time. Like an orchid growing on concrete. Even though, as usual, the only visible part of Leila is her hair. Saad gets this feeling every morning: He opens the fire door, sees Leila lying in her bed, and for half a minute everything else ceases to exist. He doesn't allow himself to linger any longer than that, otherwise he'll soften and that isn't good. As soon as he bends down towards her, Leila's arms appear from underneath the duvet and slide around his neck. He lifts her out of bed, her legs clinging to his hips, her head on his collarbone. At five in the morning. And she never complains or wants to stay in bed. Instead, she gets dressed, stands in front of the mirrored tile that Saad has stuck onto the junction box under the 'Danger, high voltage!' sign, and fastens her hair clips. Twenty-three of them. Not that Leila can count to twenty-three yet but if one of them is missing, she notices right away:

— Dad, the blue clip is gone!

Saad points at the clip behind her left ear.

— That one?

— Not that one. The sparkly one!

When they step out of the parking garage and onto the pavement, Leila shivers.

— Cold? Saad asks.

She pushes her hand, still warm from sleep, into his.

— It's okay.

Saad sees the two men as he and Leila walk through the arch spanning across the alley. During the day it's busy here, at night too. But at just after five in the morning not even the bakery is open and that's the first place to turn on the lights.

The two men are standing next to the stairs leading up to the S-Bahn platform as though they knew that Saad's shift ended at five. But they weren't waiting for him. They were just waiting for anyone. The bull-necked one carries around a lot of flesh, his movements are slow. When he turns his head towards Saad too quickly, he stumbles backwards. Saad guesses that his blood alcohol level is at about 1.5 percent, weighing in at 115 kilos. He won't be a danger, unless he falls on top of him accidentally. The shorter one with the bomber jacket is the one to watch out for. Even now, intoxicated and after a long night, his body still holds tension and his side parting is razor-sharp.

— Oi!

The big one. Just as Saad expected. Their train will be here in three minutes. Leila doesn't let anything show but Saad feels her fingers grasp his hand tighter. He responds in kind, everything is alright.

To get to the platform, they have to walk past the two but the guy with the bomber jacket is blocking their access. Fast feet, steady stance. And possibly a knife or a club concealed somewhere in his jacket.

— My friend here asked you something.

— No, he didn't.

Leila presses against her father, who can feel the bull-necked one's gravitation behind him. It's never a good thing to have a man in your back. But this isn't about Saad, it's nothing personal. So he shouldn't take it personally.

Two minutes.

— Our train is about pull in.

— Give us a ciggy, the massive one says.

Saad smells the alcohol on his breath, pulls the packet from his jacket pocket, offers him a cigarette. The guy has to concentrate but then he gets a hold of one. Then Saad holds out the packet to the other one, a peace offering. He takes one too.

— What about a light?

It's not a question.

Saad lights their cigarettes. Strings have been put up between the houses and the embankment with lamps hanging on them. They sway in the wind and then the light would swim on the cobblestones. Just like now.

Saad hears steps approach, fast, dynamic steps – tap tap tap – shoes that touch the cobblestones for just a fraction of a second. A flying shadow in black workout gear is coming towards them.

One minute.

Saad makes to walk past the shorter one, but he blocks his path once more, thrusting a hand into his shoulder. There's force behind that. He is almost exactly the same height as Saad. Their eyes meet. Leila is clinging to Saad's thigh. It's getting harder and harder not to take this personally.

— Have a smoke with us first.

— Sorry, our train's about to arrive.

The night-time runner whooshes past them, tap tap tap ...

The big guy grabs Saad's arm from behind and pulls him around. It takes him a moment to focus on him.

— You're going to have a ciggy with us first.

The train arrives above Saad and Leila. No problem yet. They'll just take the next one. Right that moment, the tap tap tap stops.

A young woman's voice asks:

— Is there a problem here?

Saad thinks: there wasn't until just now.

Nihal

Nihal steps into the light. Her clothes fit her like they were sprayed on, the hood frames her face. The orange light of the lamps swaying in the breeze flickers on her shoulders. She wonders why she interrupted her run. Three guys having an argument outside the S-Bahn station. Not

her circus, not her monkeys. Then she realises: It's the little girl clinging to her father's leg. A small, frightened girl.

Everyone looks at Nihal, the three men as well as the girl. As though she had jumped up from an invisible trap door. She makes a movement as though to loosen her neck.

— Everyone here mute and deaf, are they?

The man, whose leg the girl is clinging to, shakes his head barely perceptibly. Nihal wonders what he wants to tell her with that. That there's no problem? Dude, she thinks, there's two guys here who are trying to start something with you, and you've got a child stuck to your leg and *you're* the one who *doesn't* have a problem? Or is he trying to tell her that she should stay out of it? Is this some sort of deal going down? She looks at the man: Really?

The fat one butts in: — What's she want?

The guy in the passageway: — Why don't you ask her.

The big guy takes a step towards Nihal which immediately causes her body to start releasing adrenaline. One more step and he'll be within range. He waves his arms like he was chasing off pigeons.

— Better keep on running, or you might get hurt.

Control your emotions. One of Nihal's problem areas. She's got to work on that. Schäfer, her boss, thinks that if she doesn't, it might become her downfall one day.

She takes a deep breath: — Can't recall that I've asked you anything.

The massive one turns towards his buddy: — What's she on about?

A critical moment. The guy with the bomber jackets senses a loss of authority. That's when a situation like this can take a turn real quick.

— Piss off, pussy. This is a conversation among men.

Nihal looks at him past the fat one: — What did you just call me?

— Pussy. He takes a drag on his cigarette. — Or do you prefer cunt?

Nihal shoves past the fat one, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

— I'll show you cunt, you wanker.

— And I'm about to give you some dick, you cun ...

Before he finishes his sentence, Nihal's left hook hits his right upper arm. He drops the cigarette, ambers raining on the cobblestones. His right fist comes fast but before he can take down the woman in the full body suit her head isn't where he just saw it two tenths of a second ago. His brain is still processing the information when Nihal lands a textbook kick on his upper

thigh and a one-two punch on his chest. He opens his eyes wide, makes a sound like a punctured tyre.

Nihal's feet take up basic position. She really has to work on controlling her emotions. That same moment, two beefy arms close around her from behind. The fat one. Fuck. As the other one slowly gets back on his feet, Nihal tries to twist free from the man's grip, but his arms are like excavator shovels. Meanwhile, the guy with the bomber jacket picks up his still-glowing cigarette. Nihal tries to keep him at a distance with her kicks.

— Make her stop that.

Nihal feels the big guy shift his weight, pushing his body on top of hers. He's at least twice as heavy as she is. She holds up to the pressure briefly, then her legs fold like straws. From the corner of her eyes and with blurry vision she sees the guy holding his daughter's hand.

— Maybe you'd like to help out?

By now she is kneeling on the cobblestones like a she was doing penance while the large man has her in his clutches. The guy with the bomber jacket takes two drags on his cigarette so that the ambers are fresh, picks it up between his thumb and index finger like a dart and bends down to her.

— You're a real mega cunt, you know.

Nihal's anger is stronger than her fear. She spits in his face.

As he takes a breath, he grimaces. Pain. Looks like he's got a broken rib. Or two. His side parting isn't looking all that sharp anymore either. He moves his face right in front of hers.

— And do you know what we do with mega cunts like you?

Before Nihal learns what they do, the massive guy behind her suddenly slumps down and buries her under 115 kilos of living flesh. Something in her shoulder cracks, she groans, then she can no longer breathe. Luckily, the next thing that happens is the lifeless mountain of meat being pulled off her, air flows into her lungs. And with it anger. She presses her hands into the floor, another crack in her shoulder, a leap and she is back on her feet.

She has no idea what happened, but the big fella is lying beside her like a beached whale, his arms on the cobblestones. Next to him stands the man, whose daughter is pushing her hand back into his just now. The little girl twists her mouth apologetically.

The guy who was just about to press his cigarette in Nihal's face is thinking about what the changed situation means for him. Nihal explains it to him: — You're under arrest, arsehole. Hands on your back or I'll break another rib.

She keeps an eye on his hands and when she sees him reaching into his jacket pocket she lunges forward like a coiled spring, hits him with a liver shot and two punches to his body that land so hard his arms refuse any cooperation with his brain for the time being.

With a practiced movement she twists his arm backwards, pushes his face into the floor and fixes his arm on his back with her knee. Watching this takes a certain level of bravery. As Nihal searches his jacket pockets with her free hand, the guy regains his breath and hisses something she can't quite make out. She feels a bad pulling sensation in her shoulder.

— What did you just call me?

— Nothing.

— Thought so.

She feels the rubber-coated handle of a telescopic baton in the right outside pocket. She shifts her weight onto the knee she is using to secure his arm.

— You're breaking my arm!

Possible, she thinks. Restarting emotion control from 9 am to 5 pm. The guy makes noises like a calving cow. He moans: — You really have a problem, dude!

Nihal snaps the telescopic baton onto the ground right in front of his face. — So do you.

She looks up at the man and his daughter. Where are they going, at five in the morning? Assuming that even is his daughter. The fat guy is still down on the cobblestones and doesn't move.

— What *was* that?

The man raises an eyebrow as though he was surprised too and had no explanation for why the mountain of flesh had become unconscious all of a sudden.

— He's not dead though, is he?

He shakes his head.

Nihal looks at the girl: — Is he your father?

— Yep. She smiles. — I like your suit.

This throws Nihal for a second. She's not really good with kids. They always expect something from her, and she has no idea what that is. On the other hand: She's not really good with most adults, either.

— It's sparkly, the little one says. — I like sparkly things.

As Nihal pulls her smartphone from the cuff, she looks at the dad. — I'm going to call my colleagues on patrol now, they'll take your statement.

The guy points up, to the platform.

— My arm!, groans the man whose face is pressed onto the stones.

— Tell me about it. Nihal pushes her knee into the small of his back a little harder. To the dad she says: — You don't want to make a complaint?

Instead of a reply, he pulls a rather-not face. There's something in his gaze. Regret?

— Are you illegal?

In the distance Nihal hears the train pull in above her head. The guy raises his arm, then he and his daughter walk past Nihal.

— Bye, you, the girl says.

And Nihal can't think of anything better to say than: — Bye.

Saad

At Zoo Station, they have to transfer to the U9. Just before the train arrives, there is a dull rumble in the tube and a gust of sad air wafts along the tracks. Silent people, their faces pale in the fluorescent light, disperse along the platform. The night shift gives way to the day shift. Also a few restless people on the retreat before the drugs' effect fades and the light scatters the illusion.

Leila chooses one of the fold-out seats. The doors close, the columns zip past the windows, then they enter the tunnel. Leila often leans on Saad at this point and closes her eyes for the six stops. Not today.

— Who was that woman?

— I don't know. One who asks too many questions.

— She was real fast, wasn't she?

— Looked like it.

Leila looks into the black nothingness behind the windows for two stops, then, between Amrummer and Leopoldplatz, she draws a line through the air as though something was swimming past the window.

Saad and Leila live on Drontheimer Straße, pre-war building, third wing, second floor. The door that takes you to the stairwell is smaller than the one to the second wing which, in turn, is smaller than the one to the first. As though the people of a hundred years ago had grown smaller the farther back they lived.

They hang up their jackets and put the shoes in in line with the others.

— Would you like something to drink?

— Hm-m.

Saad looks to the door at the end of the hallway. His room. Which doubles as their living room. Leila has her own room, but it's tiny. She likes it anyway, calls it her cave. One and a half rooms, kitchen, bathroom. The rental agreement says that the flat has two rooms, but the rental agreement also says that it has a balcony.

— Do you want to have a little lie-down? Saad asks.

Leila looks up to him, the countless hair clips like a scale armour on her head:

— You're tired, aren't you?

— Yes, I am.

— You lie down, dad. I'm already awake.

— And what will you do in the meantime? It's another two hours until we go to nursery.

— I'll draw.

Saad bolts the front door and sets the alarm on his phone. Lying in bed he watches Leila climb on the chair in the light of the desk lamp and pull her drawing pad and her pencil case from her backpack. Then he is asleep.

Saad is woken up not by his alarm but by Leila tickling his nose with her curls. It's light outside. His arm sneaks up, grabs her hips and pulls her into the bed with him as she screams.

— Today is the day, he whispers in her ear. — Today I'll shave off all your hair.

— Never.

— I swear. Down to the scalp. Then you'll never tickle me with it again.

— You wouldn't dare.

— Oh but I would.

Leila thinks about whether he might possibly follow through on his threat. Then she says: — I know you won't. And do you know how I know?

— Tell me.

— Because then I'd never talk to you again, ever! And you couldn't handle that.

As Saad packs Leila's backpack for nursery, the drawing pad catches his eye: a grinning horse ridden by a nun. Until Saad realises that all that black is a full-body suit.

The advantage of living in the third wing at the back is that you have to roll through three passages on your skateboard on your way to the street. As soon as Leila enters one of the passages, she yells out the latest words, which echo off the walls.

— Cheesecake! Snail! Dung beetle!

She put on the skirt with the cherry pattern that always flies up when she turns in a circle. Underneath that she is wearing black leggings. And the baseball cap that colours her fingers orange when the sun shines through the visor and Leila holds her hands out in front of her face.

When she drives out of the gate and into the light, her curls flash in the morning light. She stops. One foot on the skateboard she turns her upper body towards Saad. A movement in which her mother appears for one moment, carbon copy. Saad is still in the backyard and sees her through the gate like in a frame, her and Samara at the same time, like layers. The hairs on his lower arms stand up and for about three breaths he is simultaneously paralysed by grief and filled by happiness. Leila puts one hand on her hip. In this pose too she resembles her mother. As though things had been inscribed in her body that she has no idea about.

— Dad, you're as slow as a snail!

Nihal

When Nihal unlocks the front door, Mrs Kasprzak is walking towards her with her dog. And looking at her reproachfully.

— Your brother ... She lets the sentence hang in the stairwell and turns to her dog, who is really in need of a new hip too. — Balu, come!

Nihal takes two steps at once and is in an even worse mood than she was before she left for her run. Every time she tries to move her shoulder in a circle, there is a point that sends a needle right through the joint. Well done, Nihal, couldn't stay out of it once again. And all of it because of that silent idiot and his daughter. Just shut your trap for once, how about that? Stands there like none of it had anything to do with him while that fat bastard cuts off your air and then the fatso lies on the floor all of a sudden and doesn't move and that dude fucks off.

Nihal can smell the dope on the landing. As though her nose was trained for it. Seems like Jamie and his squeaky ducky had smoked a joint before finally falling unconscious. As soon as she enters the flat, she her nose also detects a perfume that smells like pink plastic, Jamie's sweat and a frozen pizza that was left in the oven for too long. The entire fucking flat smells like her brother. Her flat. The butt of a joint on a saucer in the kitchen, a pretty circle of ash around it. Burnt pizza crust scattered all over the table and a half-drunk bottle of Berliner Kindl in a puddle.

Nihal flees to the bathroom, pulls down the zipper of her suit, lets the top slide down to her hip and looks at her body in the mirror: the defined shoulders, the muscular arms, the

sixpack. There is nothing superfluous, nothing pulling her down. Everything is pushing forwards. Past her neck she sees something lying on top of the washing machine. She turns around, picks up the bloodied tissues and drops them into the toilet. Someone had a nosebleed. First cocaine, then weed. Up and back down. She wonders where Jamie got the money for blow. The few things in Nihal's flat that could be turned into money are in the safe along with her service weapon, cash and her debit card. The coke was probably a gift from the squeaky duck.

She focuses on her shoulder again. Nothing visible, but after two, three quick punches, it's obvious: This can't be cured with a massage. Nihal picks up her phone and writes Betül a WhatsApp: *Need doctor's appointment and MRI left shoulder*. Afterwards she carefully reconnects the plastic segments of her shower stall that Jamie has broken off their hinges and gets into the bathtub. She turns on the water. So hot at first that it burns her skin, then so cold that she can't breathe. Then the same again.

[...]